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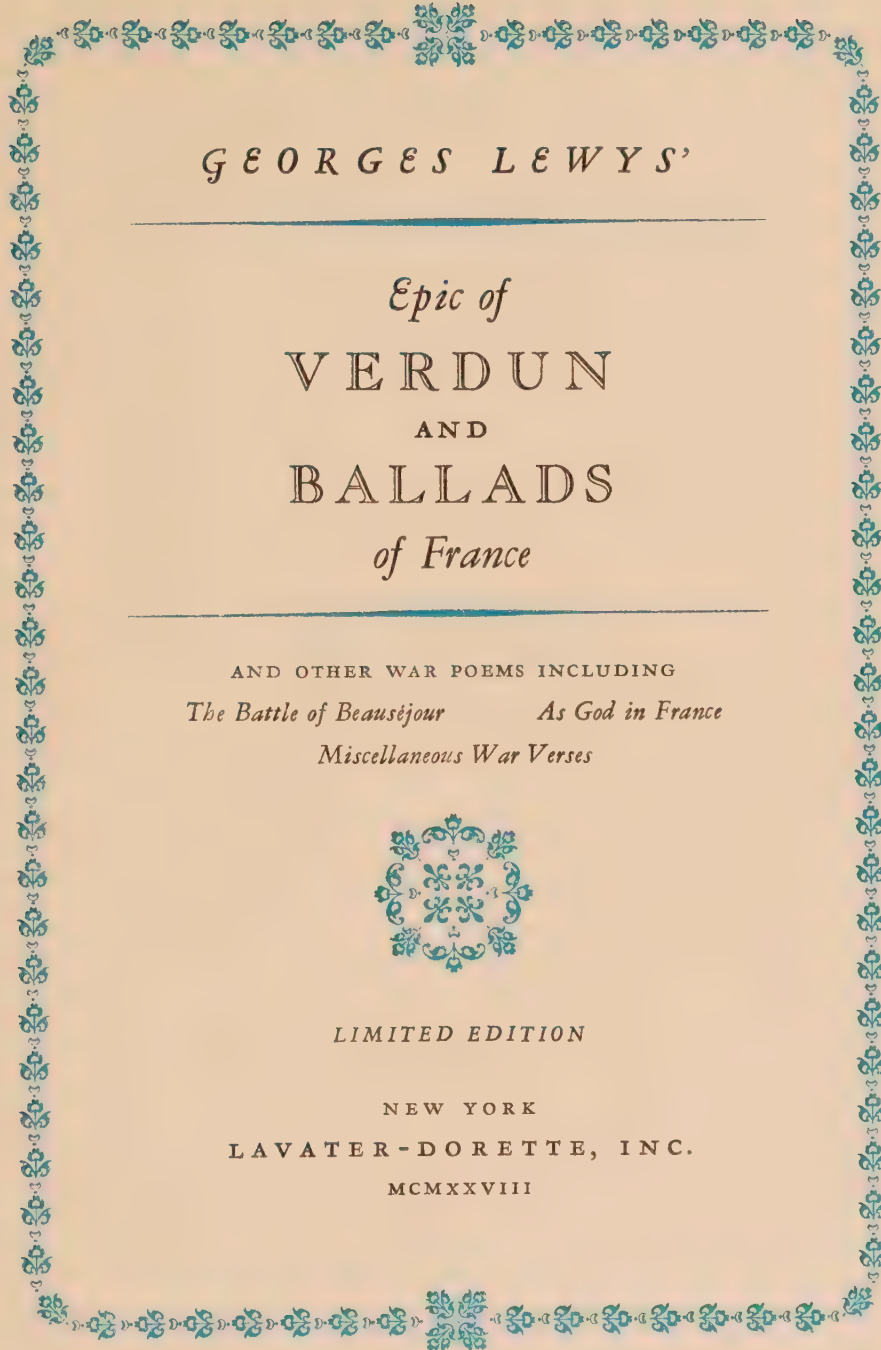
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VERDUN
and
BALLADS



GEORGES LEWYS'

Epic of
VERDUN
AND
BALLADS
of France

AND OTHER WAR POEMS INCLUDING
The Battle of Beausejour *As God in France*
Miscellaneous War Verses



LIMITED EDITION

NEW YORK
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Honneur aux Grands Hommes de la France pendant la Guerre

To Honour the Great Men of France during the War

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PART ONE

VERDUN



For Marshal Petain

VERDUN

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

THE "Iron Division of France," the 20th Corps recruited from the northeastern sections and disciplined to bear the offensive brunt of the age-old border enemies from Prussia, is returned from the Champagne for rest and recuperation in a quiet village in the Vosges. The progress of the corps through the various campaigns has been:

Summer, 1914, defense of Lorraine against the German invasion in the battles of "Morhange" and the "Grand Couronné de Nancy."

Winter, 1914-15, defense of the Ypres line in Belgium.

Spring, 1915, the offensive in Arras: the battles of "La Targette and Neuville St. Vaast" and the "Bois de la Folie."

Autumn, 1915, the offensive in the Champagne: the battles of "Beau-séjour," the "Maison de Champagne" and the "Ouvrage de la Défaite."

In a state of lowered morale the troops come to quarter in the villages about Hammeville. It is the last of January. The snow is upon the ground. The ice clutches at the tree-roots. The Second Mitrailleuse (Machine-Gun) Company of the 78th Brigade, being quartered in Charmes on the banks of the river Moselle, finds the village redolent of good cheer; and several of the mitrailleurs (machine-gunners), having made acquaintance with the town maids, commence a rivalry over their affections.

Paul Perclun and Pierre Raas are both enamoured of Mariette, a comely maid. It is to Pierre Raas she turns, while Perclun loves her the more devotedly. In this dilemma comes the call for a general departure. The Iron Corps is started for the front without knowing its destination or the peril demanding its instant return to those fighting lines but so recently quitted in fatigue.

The gunners are upon the way. The railroad cars bear them, amid tears and sighs from the deserted women, to Revigny, department

of the Meuse. From here they proceed afoot. The *voiturettes* (wagons attached to machine-gun company) are laden with the guns, knapsacks and other accoutrements of war. Ere long sounds of the battle bear in, cannons reverberate, the thunder peals from the front lines, twenty-seven hours distant. They are marching to the succour of Verdun!

They pass through the village of Evres sur Meuse. In terror of the invading Prussians, the villagers acclaim them as heroes. Cinders and smoke, sights and sounds of battle become frequent. The cold is bitingly intense. The troops press on.

Du Roy, a corporal in the Second Company, recalls to mind his last evening at home in Epinal with his wife and children about him. His youngest child has appeared to him in a vision as the incarnated spirit of Jeanne d'Arc, the heroic martyr-maid of the French. He feels exalted in spirit and accepts her as the patroness of his fortunes.

Now the refugees commence to swarm back from the battle area. Emaciated, illy-clothed peasants bereft of their worldly goods, small children, babes in arms, aged and infirm alike,—it is a woeful procession. Unable to withstand the appeal in their hungering eyes, the advancing soldiers distribute their last remnants of food and chocolate among these sufferers. The exodus continues, an unending defile through the forests, grief-stricken, flying before the triumphant Prussians. The forests are storm-bound. Icy blasts churn up the drifts, numbing hands and feet, blinding the eyes of the rescuers. Chill eats into their very marrow. Warnings are issued to them: "You are too late! Verdun is lost!"

In face of these, Captain Robilleux urges his company forward. Soldierly begins to mingle with the civilian populace that is retiring,—units from the great main French Army in total débâcle from the east! These defeated hordes, ever increasing in numbers—aviation, infantry, artillery and staff regiments, clutter the roadway. Soon are the slender defenders forced to debouch in the fields. They strive to encourage each the other. Their spirits sink; their eyes grow glassy with fatigue; their leg-muscles knot; their pulses grow languid with torpor.

❖ SUMMARY ❖

It becomes glaringly apparent: *these* are the only advancing troops among a legion of men in retreat! The "Iron Division" has been called—again, and in this most terrible hour, to stem the tide of victory for Germany in France! A world waits on this outcome! an entire country leans her faith on the 20th Corps—60,000 men! on them alone is the burden placed to resurrect and restore the sunken morale. Trenches are empty—awaiting them! Fortresses are quaking—in very last-hour peril! Yet strength fails and the hearts clutch within the breasts of these superdriven men ere the very first of Verdun's ruins comes to light. It is torn Nixeville, a village levelled in the wake of the cannons. They remain here for one hour. It is a brief respite. After this they are able to proceed again a little swifter. Fort de la Chaume is the next stop. Twenty-five kilometers are yet stretched before the wearying troops and their final destination.

The retreat of the main French Army is turned into a rout. On all sides the advancing company is urged to abandon hope for the fallen enterprise and to join with the legions swarming backward. By further effort it is enabled to reach Verdun.

The city is tottering beneath a rain of shells sent over by the German cannons eight miles beyond. The last of the bridges over the Meuse River is being mined by French engineers as the troops cross it. In case of failure by the Iron Corps to stem the advance, it will be destroyed and every man delivered into the enemy's hands!

Through lanes of wounded slowly repairing backward, shell-shocked soldiery, rent and tattered men and horses, blasted munitions, the Iron Corps continues to advance. The Second Mitrailleuse Company arrives with the corps at Froide Terre, a fortress. All are without food, wine or brandy. Their hands and feet have grown numb. The *commandant* and seven men alone remain at this post of duty to ward off the German attacks.

The 20th Corps is forced to take the lines without a moment's respite, frantically warned that already the German Crown Prince and his vast army may be investing the surrendered French positions! Forward! Forward!! To lose Verdun is to lose Paris—France! The "Iron Division of France" advances!

Shells burst to right and left. The snow falls in heavy blanketing

❖ SUMMARY ❖

drifts. The Second Mitraillease Company enters the ravine before the lines known as "La Vallée de la Mort." On one side is the most famed position on the western front—Dead Man's Hill, on the other the Côte du Poivre. Ground and atmosphere reverberate with German concussions streaming over.

The French lines are completely destroyed from this continual bombardment. Here is neither trench system remaining nor an army to invest it. Only the coming patriots may hope to save France in her critical hour.

Captain Robilleux's troops—the Second Company—take their positions. The machine-guns are erected in shell-pits. The falling snow having covered the movements of these Frenchmen, they are able now to prepare their *coup* without the knowledge of the Crown Prince. He waits at the head of his famed Prussian Guard, the very flower of the German Army. He intends to enter the valley and the city as soon as visibility permits. His aviation units are helpless before the storm which they cannot penetrate. But he believes that the French are in retreat. He knows he has routed the great main army and his triumph will, in another hour, be complete!

Another hour! In that interval has the "Iron Division" arrived! He is unaware of it. He starts his great Teutonic war machine forward to complete the victory. He expects to occupy the city without the use of a single rifle.

Instead—what disillusionment! The machine-guns of his enemy vomit forth a leaden stream! The rifles repel him! the French line has been re-invested—is reanimated, and the whole Prussian advancing host is levelled to the ground! Thus is the battle waged. Line after line advances to the slaughter—can in nowise understand why the crumpled French should have revived in such a magic manner to do battle face to face and with ever increasing determination to hold the line or perish upon the plain. . . .

In the Second Mitraillease Company ensconced before Verdun is Paul Perclun. Likewise, here is Pierre Raas, his rival. Also one Lasigny Ardette, who has become a shell-shock; and Lefèvre, a sociologist.

Lefèvre does not believe in war. He delivers himself of anti-war

✧ SUMMARY ✧

sentiments but without shirking his front-line duty. He does not recognize heroism, nor will he acknowledge duty save as it falls in his way.

In the insanity of the battle and turmoil, Paul Perclun becomes crazed with battle-lust and determines to kill his rival, Raas. He leaps upon Ardette, the shell-shock, mistaking him for Raas, exactly at the moment that a German shell, plowing over, explodes among them. He is killed and Raas is killed, while Ardette is saved through his action! The shell-shock then wanders among the dead in a partial daze. And it is Lefèvre, the scoffer and the sociologist, who finally goes out and rescues him!

After the battle the entire contingent is reinforced with fresh troops, and is finally able to withdraw itself, victorious, from Verdun!

Du Roy, the corporal, has been killed in action with the vision of the "Maid of Orléans" before him. Captain Robilleux is wounded. Blaise Miette, the dare-devil first-lieutenant of the company, who has risked his life time after time, alone is uninjured and able to lead his captain's troops to safety.

And the poem ends—as it had commenced—in Charmes-sur-Moselle in the Vosges Department, where Mariette is now the sweetheart of another company of machine-gunners.

Raoul Constant comes to Charmes, one of the members of the heroic Second Mitrailleuse Company of the Iron Corps. Through him she learns of the fate of her former lovers, and mourns. Strangely enough, it is for the discarded Paul Perclun, because she believes—as his comrades believed—that he died the rescuer of the shell-shocked Ardette!

It is left for the reader to discern that Perclun was, in reality, murderously inclined owing to the exigencies of battle, and that it was simply a stroke of fate that he saved Ardette while intending to kill Pierre Raas. Lefèvre, the real hero, refuses to acknowledge his deed; and Constant returns to the front to continue that slaughter which is the moving motive of the story.

VERDUN

RÉSUMÉ DU POÈME

LA "Division de Fer" de France, le 20^e Corps d'Armée, recruté dans la section du "Nord-Est" et entraîné à supporter le choc de l'offensive de l'ancien ennemi Prussien, vient d'être relevé de sa tâche en Champagne, et envoyé dans un village des Vosges pour un repos bien mérité.

Le progrès de ce Corps à travers les diverses phases de la campagne a été :

L'été de 1914—défense de la Lorraine contre l'invasion Germanique dans les batailles de Morhange et du "Grand Couronné de Nancy."

L'hiver de 1914-1915—défense de la ligne d'Ypres en Belgique.

Le printemps de 1915—l'offensive d'Arras—les batailles de La Targette et de Neuville St. Vaast, et du Bois de la Folie.

L'automne de 1915—l'offensive en Champagne—les batailles de Beauséjour, de la "Maison de Champagne" et de "l'Ouvrage de la Défaite."

Dans un état sombre de moral affaibli, les troupes sont venues camper dans les villages aux environs de Hammeville. C'est la fin de janvier. La neige est tombée en masse. La glace se grippe aux racines des arbres.

La compagnie de la 2^e Mitrailleuse, 78^e Brigade, en cantonnement à Charmes sur la rive de la Moselle, est bien enthousiaste en trouvant dans le village un air imprégné de joie sereine, et parfumé par l'aspect de tant de belles filles qui ne tardent pas à susciter des sentiments de rivalité, parmi les mitrailleurs, avec qui elles font connaissance.

Paul Perclun et Pierre Raas sont tous les deux épris de Mariette, mais c'est à Pierre qu'elle prodigue ses affections, et par conséquent Paul l'aime encore davantage. C'est pendant ce dilemme que l'ordre de partir est venu.

Le "Corps de Fer" est mis ainsi en route pour le front, ignorant de sa destination et des périls qui l'attendent au retour à la ligne récemment quittée en lassitude.—

Les canoniers sont en route. Les wagons les emportent jusqu'à Revigny, Département de la Meuse, laissant à l'arrière les demoiselles du village abandonnées à leurs larmes, à leurs soupirs et à leurs souvenirs. D'ici en avant on marche. Les voiturettes sont accablées de canons, de sacs et d'équipement de guerre. Bientôt les sons de la bataille retentissent, les canons mugissent, le tonnerre gronde à vingt-sept heures de distance du front. Ils marchent à la défense de Verdun.—

Ils traversent le village d'Evres sur Meuse. Dans la terreur de l'invasion Prussienne, les villageois les accueillent avec des vivats comme des héros. . . .

Fumée et cendre, spectacles et bruits de bataille deviennent plus fréquents. Le froid est intense. Les troupes se pressent en avant.

Du Roy, un caporal de la 2^e Compagnie, se souvient de la dernière heure qu'il a passée chez lui à Epinal, entouré de sa femme et de ses enfants.

Il a revu l'enfant cadet pareil à Jeanne d'Arc, l'héroïne martyre de France; son esprit s'exalte, et il accepte la martyre comme sa gardienne particulière.—

De la zone de combat l'exode des réfugiés commence. Des paysans émaciés, mal vêtus, privés de tout; petits enfants, bébés dans les bras; vieilles gens et malades, forment tous une pitoyable procession dans cette voie douloureuse! Ne pouvant résister à l'appel de ces yeux égarés par la faim, les soldats en marche font distribuer le reste de leur ration à ces pauvres infortunés, et la ligne grandit toujours en défilant à travers les bois, fuyant devant les Prussiens victorieux.

La tempête se déclenche, un vent glacial siffle dans la forêt agitant fortement les monceaux de neige dans un tourbillon, aveuglant ainsi ces braves, leur rendant les mains et les pieds transis, jusqu'à frissonner dans la moelle dans les os . . . et une voix lugubre qui les fait frissonner davantage, les prévient que "c'est trop tard, que Verdun est déjà perdu!" . . .

En face de cette catastrophe, le Capitaine Robilleux excite sa Compagnie à redoubler sa marche. Des soldats en retraite du Grand Corps d'Armée, en débâcle de l'Est, s'entremêlent aux habitants qui quittent la zone d'invasion.

Au fur et à mesure qu'ils s'avancent des autres les rejoignent, et la ligne s'agrandit,—aviation, infanterie, artillerie, état-major,—tous ces éléments s'entassent sur la route. Ils sont forcés tantôt à déboucher aux camps.

On tâche de s'encourager l'un l'autre, mais on n'a pas l'esprit dans cette disposition; les soldats sont accablés, ils ont les yeux vitreux par la fatigue, les jambes se nouent, les poulx s'affaiblissent par la torpeur.

Evidemment la "Division de Fer" est la seule qui s'avance parmi la légion de ceux en retraite. C'est bien elle qui a été rappelée dans cette heure terrible, pour résister à cette vague épouvantable d'une victoire Prussienne! . . . Le monde entier attend le résultat de cette démarche; et le pays aussi repose toute sa confiance dans le 20^e Corps d'Armée — 60,000 hommes! . . . 60,000! pas un de plus! . . . ils sont chargés de relever le moral affaîssé. Les tranchées sont vides, et on les y attend; les forteresses tremblent comme si elles étaient épouvantées. Les premières ruines de Verdun se montrent à jour, et la douleur étreint les coeurs de ces braves, de ces hommes anxieux de combattre; la force semble leur manquer. C'est Nixeville, la première étape,—infortuné village rasé par les mitrailles. . . .

On s'arrête ici une heure; un bref répit après quoi on se remet en marche avec un nouvel élan.

Fort de la Chaume va être leur prochaine étape, il n'y a plus que 25 kilomètres jusqu'à leur destination!—

Le Grand Corps d'Armée de France, en retraite, est en véritable déroute! De tous côtés on entend une confusion de voix avisant les troupes en marche forcée d'abandonner leur projet de défense et de se joindre à l'Armée en retraite; mais en vain on cherche à mettre frein à l'ardeur de ces esprits de fer;—et les voilà arrivés au but: VERDUN!

La ville tremble sous cette pluie de bombes que l'ennemi y envoie d'une distance de douze kilomètres. Le dernier pont sur la Meuse est miné par le corps du génie français en retraite. Si le 20^e Corps n'arrive

pas à tenir contre l'avance de l'ennemi, ce pont sera détruit, et ils tomberont tous dans les bras des Prussiens!

A travers ces plaines encombrées de blessés, qui poursuivent leur lente marche en arrière, et de soldats éternés par le choc des bombes, hommes et chevaux déchirés, déguenillés; le "Corps de Fer" continue sa marche impavide, suivi de la 2^e Mitrailleuse, jusqu'à la forteresse de "Froide Terre." Il n'y a plus ni nourriture, ni vin ni "brandy." Mains et pieds sont engourdis. Le commandant et sept de ses soldats restent ici en garde.

Le 20^e Corps est par nécessité forcé d'entrer en action sans aucun répit.

On les avertit de nouveau que le "Kronprinz" et sa vaste armée ont envahi déjà le terrain évacué. . . . Mais nul ne peut les faire reculer. En avant! . . . En avant! . . . Si Verdun tombe, Paris tombera! Toute la France sera en proie à l'envahisseur! . . .

Et la "Division de Fer" va en avant! . . .

Des bombes éclatent de tous côtés. La neige tombe en grands flocons. La Compagnie de la 2^e Mitrailleuse entre dans la ravine devant la ligne de la "Vallée de la Mort." . . . D'un côté il y a cette fameuse position désormais historique de la "Butte du Mort Homme;" de l'autre se trouve la "Côte du Poivre." L'ébranlement les mitrailles de l'ennemi résonne dans l'air et se répercute au sol.

Les lignes françaises sont complètement détruites par le bombardement continu. Il n'y a plus un système de tranchées ni une armée pour les occuper!

Les braves qui viennent d'arriver peuvent seuls sauver la France dans cette heure de crise.

La 2^e Compagnie des troupes du Capitaine Robilleux a pris position. Les mitrailleuses sont placées dans les trous d'obus. La neige ayant masqué les mouvements des troupes, les soldats préparent leur coup, sans que le "Kronprinz" ait connaissance de leur présence. Il commande la fameuse Garde Prussienne, la fleur de l'Armée Allemande;—il attend, prêt à s'avancer vers la ville dès qu'il lui sera possible de voir la route qu'on va parcourir.

Son escadre d'avions est impuissante à se percer un chemin à travers le brouillard épais. Il croit toujours que l'Armée Française est

en retraite, persuadé qu'il l'a mise en déroute et que par conséquent son triomphe ne tardera pas plus d'une heure pour être complet.

Dans une heure! . . . vraiment! . . .

Mais dans cet intervalle la "Division de Fer" est arrivée,—et il ignore ce fait. . . .

L'ordre est donné, et la redoutable "Machine de Guerre Germanique" s'est mise en mouvement pleine d'espoir qu'il n'y aura pas d'obstacle à sa volonté indomptable.

Mais, quelle désillusion l'attend!! . . .

Les mitrailleuses de l'ennemi vomissent feu et plomb sans relâche. Les canons les repoussent, la ligne française a été rétablie . . . ravivée . . . et la "Horde Prussienne" vient d'être repoussée et décimée!

Les troupes s'engagent ainsi dans un combat acharné, et ligne après ligne s'avancent vers l'holocauste sanglant. Le "Kronprinz" ne comprend pas comment l'Armée Française mise hors de combat, a pu se relever avec une telle vigueur et lui opposer sa ferme volonté de vaincre ou de périr coup sur coup.

Paul Perclun et son rival, Pierre Raas, sont tous les deux dans la 2^e Compagnie des Mitrailleurs en position près de Verdun. Il y a aussi Lasigny Ardette, plus tard un névrosé, et Lefèvre, un sociologue.

Lefèvre s'oppose à la guerre, comme principe, et il se livre souvent à des combats oratoires exprimant ses sentiments contre elle . . . pourtant il a conscience de son devoir et ne recule pas, tout en ignorant la flamme de l'héroïsme.

Dans ces conditions insensées et tumultueuses, résultat de la guerre, Paul Perclun, fou d'un désir immodéré de combat, conçoit l'idée de tuer son rival, Raas, et se jette à corps perdu sur l'infortuné Ardette, croyant que c'était Raas lui-même. Mais en cet instant un obus éclate au milieu d'eux, tuant Paul et Pierre.

Ardette, qui a été sauvé par l'action ignoble de Perclun, erre comme un aliéné parmi les morts. C'est Lefèvre, le sociologue, qui va à son secours et l'arrache à l'horrible fin. Après la bataille, de nouvelles troupes sont venues les renforcer, et la victoire s'achève: VERDUN EST SAUVÉ! . . .

❧ RÉSUMÉ ❧

Le caporal Du Roy a été tué à l'ennemi, entouré toujours de la vision de son idéal sacré, Jeanne d'Arc. . . .

Le Capitaine Robilleux est blessé. L'audacieux lieutenant de la Compagnie, Blaise Miette, qui a cherché en vain à mourir, est le seul qui reste maintenant pour reconduire les troupes de son capitaine.

Le poème se termine ainsi par où il a été commencé: à Charmes-sur-Moselle, Département des Vosges,—et où Mariette est toujours entourée de ses admirateurs de la nouvelle Compagnie de Mitrailleurs.

Raoul Constant, un des membres de l'héroïque 2^e Compagnie du "Corps de Fer," revient à Charmes. Mariette apprend par lui la fin de ses amis et elle les déplore.

Les camarades de Paul Perclun ont cru que sa mort fut causée par l'action généreuse de sauver Ardetle, et Mariette en fait autant.

Le vrai caractère de Perclun, les lecteurs mêmes le comprendront. Son action pendant la bataille ne fut pas inspirée par un sentiment de générosité ni de noble sacrifice pour son prochain; au contraire, son propos était meurtrier, et il en reçut la juste récompense. Lefèvre, le vrai héros, repousse toute allusion au sujet, et ne veut pas admettre l'action héroïque. . . . Raoul Constant rejoint ses frères au "front," à continuer la tâche sanglante qui forme le motif du poème.

CANTO I

I

ARGUMENT

"*Charmes-sur-Moselle*"

THE action commences a year and a half after the opening of the World War in France. It is the end of January in 1916. The village of Charmes on the Moselle River is the resting-place of troops returned from the front. Among these is the Second Mitrailleuse Company of the Seventy-Eighth Brigade, attached to the Twentieth Army Corps, the "Iron Division of France," which has fought in Lorraine, in Ypres, Arras, and, lastly, in the Champagne where three gains were made in three consecutive battles: *Beauséjour*, *La Maison de Champagne* and *L'Ouvrage de la Défaite*. Now, fatigued, the troops quarter among the villagers and become sweethearts with various of the young women. Mariette is one of these, with whom both Paul Perclun and Pierre Raas, machine-gunners of the Second Company, become enamoured. Mariette prefers Pierre Raas. Perclun, however, loves her the more truly. He vows to win her affections on the following day. He hears the *poilus* sing their *chanson* as Mariette and his rival walk upon the borders of the beautiful River Moselle. By the following morning the company is suddenly ordered into service—destination unknown!

VERDUN



"And for the king's offense the people died."

HOMER: THE ILIAD, Bk. I.

I

O'ER France's war-inflamed and sad frontier
A summer and an autumn and a year
Had moved with morbid tread and ghastly stroke
Since Serajevo's crime the passions woke
Of earth's long-thought dead hatred and despair.

The January trees swung bald and bare
Save where the snow cloaked tassels on their boughs
Or wanton wind shed icicles like vows
While undulating like a lazy sea
About the altar of their nudity.

Thus January and a grim new-year
Shed outward gloom but on one hamlet cheer
That sheltered troops returning from the brunt
Of Ypres, Arras, or some other front—
The Champagne probably,—we know this much:
That three mad battles brought the foe in touch
With Franco arms, but left both sides secure
With line advanced as far as Beauséjour;
With cavalry demounted 'gainst the wire,
And Nancy's Fifth Hussars demounted high'r! . . .

The line advanced thus far by French assault
 Progressed still farther ere the second halt,
 Borne on by khaki-clad Colonial zeal,
 The clarion lending heart to falt'ring heel;
 And Maison de Champagne rears hooded crest
 'Mong the auspicious battles of the west.

But following, still pressing vantage gained,
 With every muscle tensed, each eyeball strained,
 Th' empassioned troops, proceeding licensed hate,
 Face Prussia on l'Ouvrage de la Défaite!
 And overpower with fervency and fire
 The venom of Teuton wrath and sultan hire!

Thus come the battles of the chalky soil
 To climax and to further trenchant toil.
 For as the trough is dug so dines the pig.
 Th' ensanguined modernist must likewise dig.
 Or, as the trench is dug so forms the pen:
 A nesting-place more fitting swine than men!

The homeward troops rejoice in their relief,
 And those relieving equally, and brief.
 A recreation having been provided
 Among these former—now their time is bided—
 They go to seacoast? North? Or south? Or Aisne?
 To Ypres? Somme? Or Arras? Or Lorraine?
 The die is cast at last,—the weary host
 Goes south through vale and dale, not west to coast;
 Proceeds from Vezelises to Hammeville
 That Vosges may steel the spine and warm the will.
 Thus passes January in repose,
 In re-creating hours so drained of doze.

Behold, then, France's Iron Corps *d'Armée*,
 The Twentieth—of Toul and Nancy,—gray
 With stubble-beards, the proselytes of war,
 Who fought and sacrificed and laughed and swore,
 And held the Belgians' line at Kemmel's crest
 While Ypres sobbed her soul on France's breast,
 And held the throbbing plains of Picardy
 While bird-songs thrilled the *bois* at La Folie,
 And Arras knelt in blood and La Targette
 In flames that swept her bursting brow of sweat,
 And Beauséjour and Maison de Champagne. . . .
 Both struggles making shams of Charlemagne,—
 And felt their ranks go thinning, thinning ever—
 In dinning euphony, but conquered—never!
 Behold them, then, *sans* wounded and *sans* slain,
 But wounded—slain in spirit—in Lorraine.

Yon streaming moon that flows across the fields
 Exploring pangs of flesh—the sombre yields
 Of armies decimated, in the lull
 Like empty sockets gaping in a skull,—
 Know ye th' elusive mystery of war,
 That summoner of souls to freedom's shore:
 A bourne less poor in peace, less rich in hate,
 And of those infamies when state wars state,
 And kaiser, king? Can brother speak to brother
 While battle-axe is wielded by one or other?
 O charnel fields!—Zouave and Moroccan dead!
 The place ye spread so dark is richly red.
 Your faces blanch, contorted.

Grant, O Lord,
This hour surcease from tragedy and sword,
From murder-lust and streaming moon defiled
By newly-risen graves and sadder-styled
Unburied dead—those mouthing mounds that prattle
Of mother love with ominous death-rattle
In throat, and long-parched, settling lips and jaws.

How answer to the Holy One, whose laws
Are manna to the anguished and the lowly,
O warrior, when your slightest thought's unholy
To God, to all that spirit-world holds dear?
Vain blood is spilt, vain soul is chilled with fear,
Vain life is robbed, and woman-image cheated
Of progeny—the very womb depleted.
What answer for the streaming moon reserved
As languorous her beams reflect some tomb but ill-deserved?

Heroic grows the sacrifice of war
When mind is actuated by the roar
Of cannon-shell to stand behind the state,
Defending with its heroism, hate!
Defending, but to plunder in the end
The very hearth so liberal to defend!

There is a heroism so abject
It rises to defeat its own effect,
Quivering with anxiety to yield
A martyr's breast upon th' opposer's shield;
And carrying all, a heart's wrath, to the assault
Finds doom and fitting solace in the vault
Of ages. Martial history has no debt
More pressing than the Iron Corps has set

For Verdun in the chronicles of fame:
A lasting fervour and an ennobled name!

So, sadly taxed and out of countenance,
The valiant Twentieth Army Corps of France
Returns unto its usual fighting spirit
By hours in Hammeville and cities near it.

Must conquest ever be the lot of foes
Who long to unfold their triumphs like a rose
Upon the stem of life? Or may not darts
Of love purloin the hatred from men's hearts?
What more ignoble than a loveless breast?
What more immortal than true passion's quest?
This narrative a sweeter chapter ventures
To earn from frivolous, plaudits; prudish, censures!

The Second Mitrailleuse,¹ a garbled crew
Of gunners gleaned from companies—one or two
Or three or four, or here or there, or yon,—
From units suffered and reduced anon,
Or shallowed by the loss of some-score men
(Which counts but little in the fighting when
A foe is routed or a trench retaken),
Comes into Charmes the inhabitants to waken.

Charmes-sur-Moselle has its lanes and trees,
Its cotton-mills, fair homes, and factories;
A brewery stands at either end of town
And one between as if there lately blown;
The meek Moselle cerulean flows and slow,
Reflected from the sky above, below,—

¹ 2nd Machine-Gun Company

Seeming but scarcely less devout in thanks
Than those twin-lovers loitering its banks.

Now every *poilu*¹ draws unto his own,—
Like pasha in a land of lotus sown,—
Some maiden whom he christens his *gonzesse*,²
And forthwith, *pas-à-pas*, the loves confess
A thousand vows in every thousandth key,
And not one but is locked in some degree
Between the tissues of her woman-heart.
Can God be cruel enough to rend apart
Such vows? But God is wanton in desire
Only when war is God and man-made ire! . . .
The engaging *poilus* wander on the green,
Or, rather, on the snow-mat in between;
Their blue *capotes*³ and richly staining faces
Becrimsoned by the cold, not battle traces;
Quite consciously unconscious of surprise
An arm is clasped in wistful enterprise
Above the hips of this fair maid or that,
Depending on her mood or look or chat.

“Can anyone depend on one of these,
Or is *ma belle petite* so hard to please?”
Reflecting thus, and pondering as well
The blue reflections of the meek Moselle,
Which issued altered from the limpid pool
As recollection always alters rule,
Young Perclun of the Second Mitrailleuse
Was stricken with a humour *malheureuse*.

¹French “Tommy Atkins”

²lady-love

³overcoats

He recalled the evening he but lately spent
 With honourable purpose and intent
 Beside the borders of the meek Moselle
 With Mariette, a charming *demoiselle*.
 Recalled the languor that her lashes cloaked
 In eyes that chided while they still provoked;
 The supple form that every line betrayed
 Until his blue *capote* the chill defrayed
 Of winter's welkin; less there was of chill
 Than ardour in the working of this will;
 Less chill than ardour in the look he sped
 Across the narrow distance head from head.
 And what was it she answered? How repayed
 This simple act, which yet informed the maid
 Of her true lover's heartbeat and desire—
 A world at once aflame with passion's fire?!

“The mouth says much, the mood is fair premise,
 But what are one of these compared to eyes?”
 Thought Perclun, dwelling on his lady's face,
 An image war nor winter could erase
 E'rafter from his consciousness he knew.
 A vague misapprehension shortly grew
 That threatened like the stealthy step of dawn
 To bring a full awakening farther on.
 No sign of love in those fair languorous eyes?
 No sigh of love from lips that called forth sighs?
 Yet—hold!—the day was young, the morrow younger,
 A heart that knows no doubt has held no hunger!

Thought Perclun: “Ere another day is spent
 I shall have knowledge of her real intent.”

Nor knew how true he spake. On either hand
Saw strolling his *copains*¹—a lovelorn band—
With each *gonzesse* in fettered liaison,
Then crept there to his mind this gay *chanson*:

SONG OF THE *POILUS*

Every *poilu* has his *môme*,²
Some are dark and there are some
Flaxen-haired and Teuton-eyed
From the French-Alsatian side.

Charmes-sur-Moselle, charming Charmes,
Poilus—*gonzesses*—arm in arm;
O, the banks of the fair Moselle
Every *poilu* knows them well.

Every officer goes alone,
For the officers is there none—
Neither *poule*³ nor fair *gonzesse*,
Neither bourgeoisie nor noblesse.

Charmes-sur-Moselle, charming Charmes,
Charmes in the Vosges that is always warm.
Every *poilu* has his *môme*—
What cares he where she is from! . . .

“Lacrima Christi! I am sore neglected!”
He swore beneath his breath,—and saw reflected
Beneath him in the water,—startled gaze!—
A face—a vision! Staggered with amaze,
Turned on his heel. (No doubt his senses fumbled
In that mad moment for some bourne less jumbled.)
Faced about to welcome Mariette
Whose glimpsing profile seemed to haunt him yet.

¹friends

²sweetheart

³chicken, slang for girl

But what he saw and whom he almost beckoned
Was Pierre Raas, *copain*, *frangin*,¹ of the Second,
A sturdy youth who bore the *Croix de Guerre*
With palm beside the *Médaille Militaire*
Upon his breast for valour and devotion.

Young Perclun's heart swelled with a like emotion
As that before the parapet² bears in—
The accumulated press of doom and din!
For who beside his *copain* saw he there
But Mariette the faithless and the fair!
She saw not him nor Pierre Raas saw him neither,
More interested they in one another;
Strolled on ahead exchanging smiles and vows
As frankly as an hour of day allows;
Nor fretted that the tragic form behind
Reeled after anguished both in heart and mind,
Following like moth the destructive flame
And feeding on its virulence the same.

What sight more savage to the lover spurned
Than rivals reaping favours he has earned!
The shiftless figure and the listless eye
When love has spun its web yet lost its fly.

About the supple waist of Mariette
That undulated minus its corset
In rhythm with the ankle and the knee,
Pierre's arm described a horizontal "C"!

¹brother-in-arms

²top of front-line trench

A pallor as of ghosts o'erswam the brow
Of Perclun as he heard their lovers' vow;
Saw Pierre tilt back the head from chin below
That he coveted, till both mouths described the letter "O"!

This history can have little more to say
Of Mariette, the guileful and the gay;
Suffice it that no duel was entered on,
No pistol-shots exchanged at break of dawn,
No blood flowed out, no hatred brought to flow'r
By Venus' single sentimental hour.
The *poilu* Perclun and his bold confrère
Sought each his *bachot*¹ not his *lance-pierre*;²
Sought each his straw-filled turret to debouch
His senses on this simultaneous couch.
Thus anguished, while the rapturous lover slept
And charming Charmes her cloistral vigil kept,
Poor Perclun heard the steeple-clocks invoke
First one and then each hour with sad stroke
As night her morbid mantle plucked aside
For pallid dawn and his more pallid pride;
Saw Charmes, veiled mistress, *ville trop malheureuse*,
Cast sadness on the Second Mitrailleuse:
For ere the dark wed dawn's first virgin dew
The clarion sounded, "*Tout le monde debout!*"³

¹bed ²*poilu* slang for rifle ³"Everybody up!", a call to arms

CANTO II

II

ARGUMENT

"Departure"

THE villagers bid a tearful farewell to the Second Mitraillease Company, which starts for the front packed into railroad cattle-cars along with the balance of the members of the "Iron Division of France"—60,000 men strong. Introduction is now made to Lefèvre, a *poilu* of sociological turn of mind, and to Rudolf Delmanhorst of the Second Company. Paul Perclun mourns his departure from his beloved Mariette, while she is in secret grieving over Pierre Raas. Arrived in Revigny, department of the Meuse, the company is debarked, and started afoot on its journey to Evres. Sounds of battle penetrate the storm-bound countryside; the roar of great cannons and a rain of cinders intermingle with the horrors of bleakest winter. In Evres the company learns its destination. "Save Verdun!" cry the townsfolk. All are acclaimed as heroes. They continue their progress afoot. Introduction is made to Raoul Constant and to Du Roy, a corporal in the company, who recalls his last evening spent with his wife and two children in Epinal not far from the village of Charmes. His youngest child has appeared to him in a vision as the incarnated spirit of Jeanne d'Arc, France's "Maid of Orléans." He pledges himself for life or death—to France! and grieves that his son is yet too young to perish in the service of his country. Meanwhile the mule-conductors are leading the cavalcade over the frozen ground toward Verdun; and introduction is made to Robilleux, captain of the company, and to Blaise Miette, its chief-lieutenant.

II

Low clouds hung in a palish, frigid sky.
 No member of the company knew why
 Nor where nor when nor how the way was made
 But followed out his captain and obeyed.
 The *voiturettes*¹ were speedily packed in
 And men and mules deployed with fitting din
 Into their proper places; sobs and songs
 Commingled from the energetic throngs
 That gathered to depart the saviour-Second
 From Charmes with clamour seldom previous reckoned;
 With *gnole*,² with *pinard*,³—succulence desired!—
 Each *poilu*'s heart accordingly was fired;
 And straightway sought with every ardent token
 Indulged in these amours yet seldom spoken,
 To press his *gonzesse* in the last farewell,
 That time—God knows, 'twas true!—alone should tell
 How solitary must her future be.

How true to every vow and fealty
 Are those who, biding in their village quiet,
 See shriven from their breasts the very diet
 Of love—the object of their sentiment—
 The alpha and omega single-blent!
 The parter from the parted takes his leave
 Alike to mourn but leaving her to grieve;
 The open world is his to plant or plow,
 The single hearth her bourne, his glance her vow!

¹small wagons carrying guns, sacks, etc., of machine-gun company

²*poilu* slang for brandy

³*poilu* slang for wine

When, then, the *voitures à bestiaux*¹ bore out
 Their human freight upon this covert route,
 And Charmes lay on the horizon a blot,—
 A memory,—and even later not
 So much as is contained in one small thought,
 Pierre Raas his former friends and *frangins* sought.

“Where do we go?” said Rudolf Delmanhorst.
 A *poilu* who at once conceived the worst—
 Lefèvre, cried: “To La Villette,² my brothers!”
 But this retort scarce satisfied the others.

“We go to Argonne!”—“Picardy!”—“The Aisne!”
 They vied with one another; in the main
 Chose Belgium, as if theirs indeed the choice!
 But ever there intoned the solemn voice:
 “To La Villette, my brothers,—to the slaughter,
 Where blood will flow like wine and wine like water,
 Where men will fall and birds will sing, contented
 That theirs is not a lot by man invented!”

“To La Villette,” the maddened wheels replied
 Beneath the carriages to those inside:
 “To La Villette—to La Villette—Villette—”
 Pierre Raas, in slumber, seemed to hear them yet,
 As he his couched head nestled on his arm
 And straightway thought his last of charming Charmes.

Forgetfulness should be akin to those
 Innumerable virtues that dispose

¹cattle-wagons, i. e., railroad cars

²slaughter-house district of Paris; sarcastically applied to the war front

To look on misery in a war-stained land
 As ever past but never near at hand.
 We speak of battle as a refugee
 Would speak of horrors—ever prone to flee;
 But shambles that men make are men desired—
 For cattle or for humans like inspired.

But one there was in spite of La Villette
 Whose thoughts recurred anon to Mariette;
 Whose lightest act held ever her in mind,
 As if she in the slightest did in kind!
 This was the *poilu* Perclun. Wotted he
 Not of the fair *gonzesse's* perfidy
 That he should wear her ever clos't to heart
 When love is of man's life so small a part?

The *poilu* Perclun—like so few of earth—
 Prorated Mariette, not by her worth
 Before the altar of the highest station
 Nor noblest—but of simple adoration!
 He held her as an image, the ideal
 Of which surpassed so far the actual real,
 That had he known her in the truer rôle
 Must for his agony have had console.

We know this much: that parting in such doubt
 From all his soul held tender and devout
 In Charmes, caused Perclun keenest suffering,
 Of which Pierre Raas was scarce the smallest thing.
 He saw the moistness of the languorous eye
 Of Mariette that boldness rendered shy,
 When, in the full red tremble of the morn,
 Her fertile lips had equal tremour worn

For this Pierre Raas,—his *copain* and his brother,—
Born of the same *patrie*, though different mother;—
Had felt with sodden soul though swelling breast
Her virgin love from him a thing digressed.

And what thought Mariette the while Perclun
Felt torture through his frenzied pulses run?
Gave she one moment's heed, one shadow's breath
That *he* should face beside a soldier's death?
It is not reckoned so. The heart may hold
An equal quantity of dross and gold.
To do the lady justice may 't be said
She gave to Pierre Raas gold, to Perclun lead.
And while the latter gave to her pure gold,
The former was beneath the surface cold.

So 'tis with sentiment the whole world over;
Who loves a love is seldom, if at all, acknowledged lover!

In Revigny, department of the Meuse,
Arrived betimes the Second Mitraillease.
An icy wind a glistening snow determined
That blue *capotes* and *kepis*¹ nature-ermined
As men and mules detrained. The steaming files
Deployed along the road, whose gleaming miles
Of hillocks rose a barrier now and then
Most treacherous to *voiturettes* and men.
The slipping, sliding, heavy-laden crew
Of *échelons*² and *caissons*³ slowly drew
Toward Loupy-le-Château, where flooding sun
Shot rays of amber like a gatling gun

¹caps ²single small wagons or trains of wagons ³large wagons

Into the circumambient, flaky air—
At once the exultation and despair
Of all the company, for with each stride
A steady footing was at once defied,
And mule and mule-conductor left to scramble
With broken neck or leg—a vicious gamble.

Thus, while the morn was virtuous with cold
So cutting that the best among the bold
Could only beat their breasts and shout: "*Holà!
Espèce d'abruti, ne retardez-pas!*"¹—
The liquid warmth of Loupy-le-Château
Fell on their sanguine cheeks with golden glow,
So bleeding lips and frosted hands and feet
Restored with all alacrity complete!

In ruined eastern France are many churches
To which the chance wayfarer grateful lurches.
In these war-ridden days 'tis scarce demanded
That other than French troops be this way stranded;
Nor is it prevalent to find unscarred
These altars of divinity, whose charred—
Though uncorrupted—inner shells are portals
More fitting far for saints than sinning mortals
To enter heaven. Less of paradise
Than hell there seems on earth in present guise;
More use for France's battle-bittered troops
In these torn temples than religious dupes.
'Tis therefore seen with what unmeasured haste
The Second Mitrailieuse such structure faced;

¹"Numbskull, make haste!"—applied by conductors to mules

And—'cording to the Scriptures: irreligious!—
Took mules and *voiturettes* with noise prodigious
Into the sacred depths. Without, the snow
And ice and sleet and wind conspired to blow
Both sun and sermon to the fecund skies
That stretch above,—man's haven when he dies,
Says Christianity. So warriors slay,
And in the name of righteousness they say,
Forgetting that the passions they incur
Were buried by the Holy Sepulchre
Two thousand years removed from all of this.

Now pious purged and with benumbing bliss—
Having laved sufficient in religious waters—
The blue-clad company chose other quarters
Less antipathic the employ of arms:
A day-and-night's ensconce on neighb'ring farms;
And, following this, once more the clarion sounded
That pulses through the slender village bounded,
And bore it on its way to Evres sur Meuse,
Where rested then the Second Mitraillease.

Deep-throated with the roaring resonance
Of arch-defenders though they give offense
By every shell far-flung in battle-lust
Against a foe that thrust returns for thrust,
The cannons, shatt'ring through the pungent air
Like severed souls demoniac with despair,
Gave ardent promise of the fate in store
For every one of France's valiant corps—
The Twentieth, now labouring toward Verdun.

How early had the Teuton hordes begun
 Their steady hamm'ring at this fortified gate?
 It was but days, yet counted near too late
 Already for the succour here intended
 To lines so harshly rent, inaptly mended.
 A whole grave army nestling at the roots
 Of one fair city, thirsting for the loots
 That carnage always bandies like loose thought
 Among a wanton army wanton fraught,—
 Is not this vulturous game (so often cited)
 'Mong men as well as women to be pitied?
 Is any less the evil among panders
 Whether they wreck in brothel or in Flanders?

The argument is specious like in Verdun
 Where habitants, called on to bear the burden,
 Take flight, and, reckless of their toll as toilers,
 Leave all—save virtue only—to despoilers.
 The engaging armies stalemate or advance,
 (In either case the gore is spilt in France!)
 And, sanguine as the totalled ledger-sheet
 In this wise, still more carmine in retreat
 Must this same ledger be. There is no choice
 'Twixt victory and defeat in life's invoice;
 The conqueror leaves conquered on the field,—
 The conquered may proclaim an equal yield;—
 For what are numbers when the soul is bruised?
 A hale humanity when war's unloosed?
 All charity, all godly instinct wanes
 When man is in travail with battle pains;
 Descent is swift and proper to the tomb
 Where even then for brutes is little room.

He dies, who, like the night-light, brought to flower,
Can only shine to exercise his power
Sufficient when the moon is at the high,
To be forgotten when true day is nigh.
Before the phosphorus of divinity
How small is then the conqueror's vanity
That haloed, sung in eulogy here below,
Before eternal lamp-light sheds not even one wan glow! . . .

The tangy odour of smoke and sooty cinder—
Than which no wind's adverse enough to hinder!—
Encircling with its roiling tongue the village
Of Evres sur Meuse, gave plenteous hint of pillage
And arch-destruction to the entering troops.
The villagers were gathered here in groups
And there, discussing with a liberal mind
The advent of the enemy enshrined
So frequent to the borders of their Meuse.

No sooner had the Second Mitraillease
The first of all its *échelons* deployed
Within the town, when forthwith, overjoyed,
A simultaneous halloo there rung
From group to group the villagers among:

"Thou 'rt come to save Verdun—advance! advance!
The good God bless and keep you, sons of France!
Save Verdun!"

Onward swung the weary marchers
With scarce sufficient time for these departures,
And twenty-two o'clock saw *voiturettes*
And men and beasts depart. What haste begets

When succour is the urge! Deliverance
Was by these hosts but duty's countenance;
They struck upon the trail with all due haste,
No single moment's time giv'n o'er to waste.

Along the road from Evres shivering blasts
Of wet wind swept the pines like naked masts
Above a storm-lashed keel in mid-Pacific,
With equal vigour and alike terrific.
The snow in heaping deluge swirled dismayed on
And banked the roadway previous heavy laden,
So that the stagg'ring Second, flesh and bones,
Gave forth in concert with the dismal moans
Of elements, a sort of silent pray'r
That stabbed the leaden blanket of the air
And emptied in the ready void above:
A pleading for divine support and love.

Pierre Raas, with *godasses*¹ no longer gripping
But like his nearest neighbour, sliding, slipping
Upon the waxen surface of the snow,
Bore neither frown nor smile upon his brow
But rather stolid conscientiousness
That ill-befit his early lovelorn dress
In Charmes. Yet war's conditions are this way:
They make of blithesome, weary; gruesome, gay.

"This promises to be a fiendish night,"
Said Raoul Constant, his neighbour on the right,—
"The damp crawls down the collar."

¹shoes

None replied
 To this most obvious fact, but side by side,
 And trudging, tramping, rank and rank and file,
 Paced on the dreary pathway mile by mile.
 They were too clammy cold, their breaths too heavy
 To utter words of comment on strife's levy.
 The boots rose up, the boots fell back again,
 Rose up, fell back, rose up, fell back. The strain
 Became enormous; shudd'ring shocks there fell
 Upon the eardrums from th' approaching hell;
 Keen flashes and reverberating notes
 That jarred the very flakes from their *capotes*,
 And made the jets expended from the nostrils
 Of steaming mules go wavering like wastrels
 Afloat upon the doubtful stream of life.

Du Roy, a *caporal*,¹ thought of his wife
 Whom last he saw in Epinal. In mind
 Together sat at home with her and dined,
 And two small children dined or romped according
 As laughter from his sallies was affording.
 One strong boy had Du Roy, in age eleven,
 The other—violet-eyed—a lass of seven;
 Both marrow of his marrow, heart of heart.
 What sodden anguish tore these kin apart,—
 This father—progeny—and wife dissevered
 As if the very fount of being fevered!

He held the little lass before his knee
 And swept her face with silent reverie—

¹corporal

The blue eyes, innocent and undivining,
 The scarlet cheeks and amber tresses, shining
 With youth, sun-flooded. Through the room there rose
 An angel's voice that touched his ears like those
 Celestial echoes credited to one
 Whose peasant dress was but the path begun
 In that short agony from birth to tomb—
 A mailed enchantment that the years exhume
 For Domremy, for Orléans, for France!

Du Roy rose trembling from this seeming trance,
 And pledged himself with orthodox devotion
 To drink his deepest of this holy potion;
 Bade wife and children speedily farewell
 Ere inner flame devour outer shell
 Completely, and, regretting most, in truth,
 His son's extremely omnipresent youth,
 With rapid heart his frenzied footsteps bent
 Toward Charmes-sur-Moselle and his regiment.

These memories so fittingly ordained
 To light his soul where fleshly senses pained,
 Now flared forth,—on the zealot's face betrayed:
 Triumphant tribute to the martyr-maid!
 An ecstasy each sombre feature flooded
 As he his pathway through the densely-wooded
 And heavy-laden, snowy boughs deployed.

The mule-conductors likewise through this void
 Proceeded, tottering; with break of day
 Discovered on two sides in gaunt array

The forest-trees, their gnarled and brambled branches
 Like crouching lions leaping from their haunches,
 Adripping frozen particles like tears
 Upon the tombstones of the yester-years.
 A gust of storm-wet wind the desolation
 More cuttingly resolved. In desperation
 Empassioned outcries smote the turgid path
 That broadened to a highway,—screams of wrath:
 “*Holà!—Holà!—espèce d’andouille!*”¹ they shouted,
 And forthwith every labouring hinny clouted!

Thus, trudge, tramp, tramp,—through dusky dawn
 protracted,
 And husky—hazy—settling gloom enacted,
 The company bore on with stern persistence,
 A shatter of grim cannons in the distance.

No less enduring than his men or mules,
 Nor more, save when authority thus schools
 Itself to bear the separate trials collected
 Of all, beneath one roof—as ’twere, erected
 By army rote, a rather doubtful guerdon,—
 Strode Captain Robilleux to succour Verdun!
 His crinkly mustache and gray crinkly eyes
 Betrayed his mind’s condition in this wise:

“What drastic crisis threatens that Petain
 Should commandeer the Iron Corps again?
 Should pluck worn soldiers from a thrice-earned rest
 To vomit them on France’s bloodiest crest?”

¹species of a fool,—an epithet

What answer had the query? Half in doubt
 Turned to his chief-lieutenant then about,
 Miette from Arras, *forgeron*¹ by trade,
 Advanced from rank to rank and grade to grade,
 Reservist, in the infantry heroic,
 Yet verging in the end to paranoiac;
 For what can butch'ry bring but butcher lust:
 The desire to counter life with canker thrust;
 The desire to lower God like stricken standard
 Before the foeman—hell's own master pandered
 By human ignorance, or call it greed!
 (Historians say it's sacrifice to bleed!)
 Of this same sacrificial La Villette
 Was then a leading figure Blaise Miette.

Beneath the fritter of decaying cold
 That rendered obsolete their footsteps' mould
 As early as the marching troops bestowed them
 Upon the highway that no longer showed them,
 His captain saw the restless eye portrayed
 In contrast to the firm jaw of his aide;
 The shiftless venom of the perilled soul
 Held taut before the splendour of its goal;
 And marvelled slightly at his own repulse
 In op'ning up his lips with quick impulse,
 But ere one syllable could pass therefrom
 A sight advanced which rendered him with one accordance,
 dumb!

¹blacksmith

CANTO III

III

ARGUMENT

"Débâcle"

OUT of the mists appear the first of the refugees from France's stricken quarter. Here come now the halt, blind, poor, sorrowing, young and old, the peasants and villagers driven from the environs of Verdun since the attack of the Crown Prince's forces on the previous days. Sights become heart-rending. Small children, perishing from the cold and hunger, plead with the advancing soldiers for food. From its slender rations the "Iron Division" dispenses. The Second Company is warned to desist in its efforts to succour Verdun by the retreating populace. "It is too late! all is lost!" cry the refugees,—"*Verdun est perdu!*" Regardless of this, the heroic troops forge on. They pass the first of the returning divisions of defeated soldiery from the front, those who are unable to stem the advance of the Germans. This is followed by others in great numbers; and soon it appears that the whole main army of France is in retreat! Ere long this is turned into rout! At every forward step the Second Mitrailleuse Company is warned to give up the hopeless task and to join the march toward the rear. In face of these further warnings and its hunger and abject fatigue, the company holds out. Sounds of battle grow ever more menacing and insistent. The thunder of cannonading from the German side is offstood by a single huge battery from the French. Captain Robilleux urges his company forward.

III

“*Holà!*” The cry was startling and sufficient.
 The first conductor reined his mule efficient.
 Across the oval distance at their fore
 Just issuing from the gloom the morning wore,
 With melancholy mien and stagger’d stride,
 A group progressed that tranquil thought defied;
 A caravan of isolated peasants
 Escaping from some snare like wounded pheasants,
 Their holiday habiliments pathetic
 In view of so much misery mal-prophetic.
 Small voices intermixed with soothing tones
 Of quality alone a mother owns
 Spanned o’er, and drove the most depressing scene
 Into the minds of those who marched between
 The dank, gray forest growth. A sound of tears
 And moaning heart-wrung cries now smote their ears.
 They saw, with eyes accustomed to sights gorier,
 One chillingly depicting pain far sorrier!

A woman bore her child—a babe in arms—
 With that unusual clutch that war’s alarms
 Make instantaneous; tugging at her knees,
 Where petticoats that lashed were soon to freeze,
 A girl-child writhed. How pale—how ghastly white!
 A boy of age unsure, yet certain fright,
 With teeth that chattered and with eyes that plead,
 Walked also in that group on crunching tread.

Now sobbing with the stabbing sound of woe,
 The babe awoke. The mother hushed it low,

And sought in futile desperateness to chain
 The ebbing life so clearly on the wane;
 Gave courage in a word to either side
 Where boy and sister strove their fear to hide
 Behind a cloak of cold. In sharp surprise
 The trio seemed with simultaneous eyes
 To pierce the aspect and to see approaching
 The Second Mitrailleuse, their path encroaching!

'Twas then stock-still they stood. A moment's test
 Of courage strained the heartbeat in each breast;
 And, while this hesitation held them bound,
 The peasant father of the group, unsound
 In limb, yet stoic in the face of war,
 Led forth the remnant of his worldly store:
 A single cart, high-heaped with house débris,—
 Whatever leapt to hand in pot-pourri,—
 Without much choice, or, having choice—much ware,
 Since peasants' diet 's in the main dull care!

A thinnish cow, reduced by half its weight,
 (An augury of France's fainting state,)
 Tracked in his tracks—the house-cart in the van,
 With moving cud like maund'ring Musselman;
 Completing with its misery desolation
 Nor Louvre nor Vatican knew duplication,
 Whether in "master" etched in tragic tone,
 Whether in sombre sordidness of stone.

The leading *échelon* now drew abreast
 The peasant family and their woe addressed:

“*Holà!*” he cried,—“Why is it that you fare
With faltering step and bridled with despair
Through Verdun’s forests? Why is it you go
With household caravan through sleet and snow?
Is there no better day, no freer path
Where devil’s less engaged, and God knows wrath
More seldom?”

To his knees the great-boy sank
As if the joints beneath him played some prank
To overthrow his courage.

“Rise!—for shame!”
His father domineered, his face aflame.
Addressed the stranger:

“Know, *m’sieu*’, the hour
Is past when even superhuman power
May succour Verdun. *Verdun est perdu!*
The Prussians drive the populace, *poilu*,
Like chaff before the vigour of their arms
From neighbouring villages and fronts and farms;
And after that the army, full in flight!
There is no succour but in coming night,
And even then most temporary. See,
The pilgrims of a nation follow. We
Are but the leaders of a line unending.”

The Second Mitrailleuse now saw impending
A most colossal spectacle,—indeed
One that enkindled through the ranks each seed
Of patriotic fervour, nor the least
For threatened Verdun, Fortress of the East!

They saw advancing others of like fate
 Than they upon whose speech they lay in wait:
 Saw caravans—a steady, twisting stream
 Of peasants—others—more!—and then a team
 Of oxen, hauling by its slowsome gait,
 A high-stacked vehicle of doubtful weight,
 Surmounted by a most kaleidoscopic
 Rustic crew—a comic-opera topic!—
 These sat up high, and always gaily turbanned
 Resembled most a wedding-party fresh banned
 In Normandy; their tawdry garments flutt’ring
 Before the gusty character of clutt’ring
 Snowy wind. On closer—near—approach,
 However, bore most piteous reproach
 Upon their sagging countenances: terror
 Lest those before them on the pathway error
 Should lead to be their enemies in cloak.

“*Sacré!*” This sharp ejaculation spoke
 Du Roy, the *caporal*, “if ever cheer
 Were writ in gay apparel, it is here!”

And so it seemed to Perclun, who perceived
 At once in this a sentiment, and grieved.

The chief-lieutenant—Blaise Miette from Arras—
 And others of the company in chorus,
 Called out: “What do you say?—is Verdun lost?”

Immediately upon the gust was tossed:
 “*Verdun est perdu!*—*per—du!*—*mes braves!*”
 It rose and fell and rose again like waves

That echoed through the forest, every sound
Among the swirling eddies finally bound.

"As bad as that?" The captain—Robilleux—
Addressed a pair of *anciens*¹—"Mes vieux,
Tell me, is the line so badly bent?"

"Bent?—ha—ha!" A hearty laugh was spent
Upon the blameless air. "*Mon capitaine*,
You go to face the *boches*² now in vain!
The city is in flames,—the battle over,—
What's left of France's army lies in clover;
The rest—I do not call that soldiery!—
If you had seen Sedan in Seventy:
That was a battle!" . . .

"Come, *farceur*,³ make haste,
My company has little time to waste;
What threatens Verdun?"

"Threatens?—*hé*—ha—ha!
The *boches* are inside! Our armies—pah!—
They only see how fast they can retreat!" . . .

What tidings to the soldier more replete
With chagrin, ignominy, infamy,
Than this: that his courageous comrades flee?
Before the clamour of the foeman's steel
To rise, to die, pierced through, but spur on heel!—
This were supreme. The nostrils of Miette
Spread wide ere saw he the inflamed *binette*⁴

¹old people ²the *poilu*'s name for his German opponent ³clown

⁴*poilu* slang for face; (Miette was formerly an infantryman)

Of his superior; clicked his heels together
In readiness for what of wind and weather
There might befall. But patience eased the strain.
To his tormentor spake the *capitaine*:

“Say that the Second Mitrailleuse goes forth
To rise, to die—perhaps—to prove the worth
Of Franco arms. THEY SHALL NOT PASS, *mon vieux!*—
These be the parting words of Robilleux!”

He faced the company with stern precision,
And seeing there no hint of indecision,
Gave out his short command: “*C’est pour la France!*”
The columns, halted from their late advance,
With ringing cheer and hearts uncommon fired,
Set out upon their mission fresh inspired.
The *voiturettes* were lashed, and mile on mile
O’ertook the stagg’ring fugitives, whose file
Seemed endless. Small, benumbing childish forms
Whose fragile bodies—never marked for storms—
Blued, swaying in the murky, cloudy cold;
And steaming wagons, creaking as they rolled
Upon the forest path; strange, strained old faces,
The poverties of war and age’s traces
Together forming on their parching skin
A register of wanderings akin
To those so cunningly devised by Sue
As heritage ordained his fabled Jew;
And mothers with the nurslings at the breast.
As trod the early group—so came the rest:
A chain of misery, conscienceless and craven,
Seeking naught of life and less of heaven

Save only safe respite; a tortured clan
Devised of God and disavowed of man!

Nor did the arch-débâcle bring completion
With these sore specimens of life's depletion:
A whole rejected corps of aviation
Faced now the fresh defenders of the nation!—
And bore its planes on *camions*—huge lorries,
Agrumbling 'neath the weight combined of glories
Past, and hideous, stark and gray defeat
That cumbered it this dank day on retreat.
The whole platoon bunched up; the crater's edge
At Verdun washing it like so much sedge
Into the virgin forest.

“God—betrayal!”

Swept from the Second Mitrailleuse!—a wail
That spun lugubrious 'mong the fertile snow,
Reeling almost personal with the blow
That this exodus soldiery should boast
Likewise with the non-combatant host.
Scarce could the troops of Robilleux conceive
So grave a tragedy; scarce less believe
The sun, the moon, the stars, the fecund sky,
The earth itself, the pow'r to live or die,
Were preordained, than that the arms of France
Should turn into a mock for chuckling chance
To cast this way or that. What Prussian *will*
Were strong enough or harsh enough to chill
The ardour of the Bonaparte's estate—
A heritage defrocked, yet fraught by fate
With qualities canonical in war?

From Robilleux's seared soul the sordid scar
Would never shrive, he felt, for France's shame:
A bastard army bearing her fair name!
Unvanquished—yet despairing! Coward's brood!
No sons of hers by spirit but by blood!

The heavy drifts of surging winter wandered
About the tree-roots, knelt, roused up, and squandered!
Like ghosts new-risen from the *champ d'honneur*
First one and then each pillared *artilleur*¹
Bore forth in sheeted, frothy, foamy silence
The more amazing for the more intense,
And cleft the soggy atmosphere in twain
As 'twere an adversary mocking slain.

"God's oath, but these be strange artillery crews!"
The chief-lieutenant swore, and sought for clues:
"Where are the batteries? Where the shrouded guns?
Is there indeed which stands when Franco runs?!"

He meant by this, sarcastic-toned and jeering,
The steaming gunners and their mounts appearing
Minus all those *caissoned* springs of death
Whose very atmosphere 's a dismal breath
Of battered bloodiness, of hæmal hue—
The cannons, vari-calibred, quaking new
Upon the opposition's side, no doubt,
By this retreat so closely bord'ring rout.

"What ho!" The voice of Blaise Miette was sped
Across the ashen-pale expanse ahead

¹artilleryman

Where two-score of the cannoneers their mounts
Propelled through shatt'ring snow like spewing founts
Of opalescence;—"Whither go, brave brothers?"

Before this taunting jibe came limping others
Denuded of their field-offense, dejected,
Forsworn of flag, by living God rejected,
Yet battle-scarred and wishful of success,
Ready to summon spirit, yet far less
Inclined to face once more the torturing sword
Of bedeviled Prussia's ample horde.

"Brethren, go no farther—all is lost!"
The totalled cry of these who counted cost
In missing, wounded, mutilated, slain,
Told but too plain they dared not risk again.
"Stay back; you have no chance. 'Tis suicide
To venture to the stricken lines," they cried:—
"'Twere valourous, but death! Heed, Frenchmen—stay!"

Most stubborn held the Second on its way:
Past officers and general staff equerries
No less benumbed than lesser dignitaries;
Past straggling soldiery—the best afoot—
Yet minus *sac* or rifle—precious loot
New-fallen to the foe,—begrimed, smoke-blackened,
Wild of eye; yet ne'er the pace was slackened.
Trudge—tramp—tramp, all trod; trudge—tramp—tramp,
Clutt'ring through the cold, the fractured damp
Marking furrows down their gleaming cheeks,
Alternate blood-red and whitened streaks.

“Faster, *mes enfants, pour Dieu*, I pray you,
Let neither frost nor boisterous battle stay you;
We go to Verdun—be that understood,
Though rage the searing flame or roaring flood,
Undeterred from these true ways of God,
Let sacrifice make hallowed soldier-sod.”

Thus speaking, though scarce one exacted urging,
Their stoic breasts with heroism surging
And longing to redeem the soiled morale
Of their confrères with more than one *rafale*
Of fractious lead, brave Robilleux instilled
Warm blood into the hearts so passing chilled
Of those returning while his own troops pressed
Into the land so dubiously obsessed.

The Second Mitrailleuse heard likewise booming
The thud of the abusing cannons, dooming
Each line of the defenses, trembling, swaying
The dull, drab daylight ever with their flaying,
Derisive in their threat to sanguify
Earth’s atoms to the very deepest dye.
And still above these sounds one seeming other
Which yet belonged as brother unto brother
The fiends of war among—a wide-mouthed voice
Borne both by pride and power to rejoice:
A giant battery, Creusot-made,¹ and throbbing
Defiance with last desperation’s sobbing
And courage as if bidding to the fray
Those stalwart ones who laboured on the way:

¹reference to Schneider’s munition works at Creusot, France

❖ VERDUN ❖

“Go to, bold comrades—Verdun faints with dread
Before the Teuton arms! Is valour fled
Our ranks therefrom that foreign ghouls may feast
Upon the ravished Fortress of the East?
Go to, we’re frantic-pressed yet stubborn-steeled,
’Twere better far to perish maimed than yield!
Ah, brothers—Frenchmen—saviours, *au secours!*”
Pronounced the Creusot giant’s crimson roar!

Or so it seemed. Upon the highway, narrowed
By straggling units, gaunt of visage, harrowed,
And silent peasant misery and chill,
The Second Mitrailleuse bore forward still,
Aware that of the legions in all Gaul
Alone the Iron Corps of France responded to her call!

CANTO IV

IV

ARGUMENT

"Fort de la Chaume"

CAPTAIN ROBILLEUX receives a message from a cycle-rider of the *commandant* to debouch his men through the fields, as the roads have become impassable owing to the congestion of the retreating main French Army. He turns aside and observes the "Iron Division" with its brave stern faces accompanying his own men into the devastated area. Encouraged, each man of the Second Company strives to impart cheer to his fellows, and the chilled and fainting troops advance into Nixeville. This is the earliest of the ruined villages of Verdun bordering on the battleground. The troops remain one hour, then the *voiturettes* (wagons) containing the machine-guns of the company are lashed forward and the march is again undertaken. Introduction is made to further members of the heroic Second Company: Lasigny-Ardette, and Duchêny, a *Gascon*; and still another warning is issued by retreating units to give up the hopeless fight. The advance continues. At sixteen o'clock (4 p. m. army time) the Second Company reaches the Fort de la Chaume. Prussian guns are quivering the terrain. Loud reverberations jar the ear-drums. The snow ceases to fall, but freezes. The *commandant* of the fort orders the company forward to the road between Bras and Verdun. Twenty-five kilometers remain to be covered and the troops are in an exhausted state. The captain protests: "My company is on the road since one,"—but in face of this and with hunger menacing, the unit is brought afoot before the very gates of Verdun!

IV

The steady thrum, like mendicant's beseeching
 As door to door his beggary he 's preaching,
 Athrobbing with the patient pulse of time—
 The years' advance and unembittered climb
 Upon the back of hoar eternity,
 Intruded through the cannons' mockery—
 The steady thrum, the sharp staccato popping
 That designates a cycle-rider dropping
 From nowhere—or the liaison,¹ at best,—
 All further highway traffic to arrest!

He hurtled up, he glided through the roadway,
 In sudden silence slipped into the snowed, gray
 Path and bellowed, like some night marauder,
 To Captain Robilleux a single order.

The Second changed immediate its direction,
 Stagg'ring from the wood as from detection,
 And out into the open fields debouched
 Where frozen bogs and ponds the pathway pouched.
 'Twas now impossible to hold converse
 In this depressing meadow, roundly cursed
 The troops, and slid and stumbled into mire
 That chilled their frames from top to toe entire.
 They saw between the flaking sheaves that fell
 Monotonous as the flame-tongues rise in hell,
 The high-road crowded with the jostling hosts
 Of Iron Corps divisions—shrouded ghosts

¹messenger service between commands, usually from superior to inferior officers

In dubious enterprise,—advancing, churning
 The sullen snow in cataracts, returning
 Twofold to the soggy ground behind
 For further hustling regiments to find
 And further churn. It was a panting path
 Bestrewn with all those relics of God's wrath
 That war incites; and auto-busses lab'ring
 Beside foul swamps their tortured trackway neighb'ring,
 Catapulting forth with fiendish flight
 The avengers of the Hohenzollern's slight.

Ere long the biting storm itself dissolved
 Sufficient 'til a spectre-house resolved
 From out the mist—a phantom dwelling, hailing
 The Second from its duty-march unfailing,
 And strong the impulse racked and flesh beseeched
 For rest within the shelter timely reached,
 Yet honour's call the braver; vain the surge
 Corporeal,—supreme the mental urge!
 The fainting soldiers of the Iron Corps
 Of France bore out their legend strength once more,—
 Past shelter, past that white-appareled dwelling
 That yet a warmth exuded comfort spelling,
 They marched; and not a genuine regret
 Was voiced above the splendour of the debt
 Accruing them from France, save Perclun only
 (The *poilu* sentimental still and lonely),
 Whose muttered expletives but veiled remorse
 That distance should remove so fair a force
 Of fighting men from proximate engagement
 With foes whose bitterness was past enagement.

He said to Raoul Constant: "The battle breaks;
Our army routs and cowardly forsakes
The bleeding city to her arch-despoiler.
God pity Verdun, for the Teutons roil her!"

"Not yet!" replied Constant,— "There 's nothing vain
In waiting for the coming of Petain.
We know, and France will know, and so the world
That there are those who rescue when thus hurled
Into the maw of death! We go to save—
And save we must the fortress from her grave!
Take courage, *mon copain*, the hour grows—
The distance lessens—ere we mingle blows
'Gainst blows the sanguinary front upon;
Verdun est sauvé this coming dawn!"

The pessimist, Lefèvre, sober-cursed,
(He who conceived at best the ultra-worst),
Was even moved by these stanch words to say:
"At least at La Villette the fatal day
Embroids both foemen—they as well as we,
Though in the annals of eternity
'Twill be alone the Twentieth that stands
'Mong corps recorded! This and other lands,
War-scourged, will realize that."

The way progressed

With further desolation giving test
To their tried courage. Ere the eleventh hour
The first of Verdun's ruins came to flow'r—
Torn Nixeville, whose outlines fluttered, limp,
Grotesquely crippled like some spurious imp,

Yet welcome still; and now a greater effort
Was put forth of the last-enduring sort
When failure threatens in the end to smother
That prodigal, success—her famous brother!

The strain became enormous; legs refused
To further harbour muscles sore-abused
And threatened relaxation sure to swamp
The Second in an all too early camp;
Gasping breaths betrayed the clutching pain
When lungs expelling failed to rouse again,
And, weakened by the superhuman drain
Of that remaining kilo, cried in vain
For air—more air—and energy until
The blue-cheeked soldiers entered Nixeville,
Tears rushing from their anguished, frozen lids
Like penitents' whom dissolution bids
Make ready in the hour of atonement,
And reeled half-perished to the bleak cantonment.

But scarce a short respite had here obtained
These weary ones, than whom no thought detained
Save that to energize with food and rest,
Most frugal, their exhausting strength, to breast
What more remained of marching cold before
They came to Verdun's rent and shattered door,
When off they lashed the *voiturettes*, protesting
Such rude disturbance from their snuggish nesting,
Afoot again between the flying legions
Departing panic-struck the battle regions.

Prodigious streams of troops now filled the roads
And choked the bogs like semi-lustrous toads,
Struggling, stomping through; and spreading fear
To further units sweeping toward the rear
Away from danger and the menaced city,
So served with cowardice when craving pity.

Gas-balloons, collapsed, and motor-driven,
Preceded battery-mounts and riders riven
Of chivalry, their valour self-confessing
A thing as hollow as its loss depressing.
*Camions*¹ followed, laden with some stores;
And officers and men by wholesale scores,
Dejected, terror-ridden, armed or not—
Depending on their individual lot
In flying from the foe—the hated Prussians!
Débâcle only second to the Russians'!

“O God, that we should witness sight so sore
As fleeing Frenchmen!” grieved the Iron Corps.
Depressed by this sad sight each driver strove
With all the power credited above
To launch more fully in the blinding snow
His *échelon* with lashing whip and crow,
Despite the passing thousands backward turned
In heat before the enemy, sad-spurned.
Flound'ring 'round, in bogs knee-deep they slashed,
Beat about in mire, tripped and thrashed;
Coruscating water, ice-entombed,
The fustiness of fetid mud exhumed

¹motor-lorries

With each *godasse*. And then disclosed a sight
Of all those previous in ignoblest flight:

A mitrailleuse contingent, heavy-weighted,
Piece for piece the Second duplicated—
Hinnys, drivers, wagons,—large and small,—
Rapid-fire rifles, gunners,—all!
An insult that to Robilleux's disgust
Personal seemed in its suggestive thrust
Against his own advancing company
Shamed by this display so cowardly.

The two crews saw, and, seeing, stared amazed;
The one retreating at that coming gazed,
And wondered that the faces turned to east
While all the rest toward sheltered west were cast.
But for a moment,—on the other hand,—
Paused, vacillant, the Second in its stand
When wrath bestrode each feature and a shout
Of anger brought the craven-crew about:

“*Poltrons!*” cried Lefèvre, Blaise Miette,
Raoul Constant and Lasigny Ardette,
Perclun, Rudolf Delmanhorst, and he
Called “The Snuffer” from the Gascony,—
“*Poltrons!* Shame! Go back and fight!” they cried
Together, “Better far you fought and died
Than this opprobrium to fasten thus
By cowardice upon the rest of us!”

Demoniac raging, all the company
Of Robilleux spat scorn in unity

Upon the dastard crews that dared to run
 With hanging heads from agonized Verdun.
 But these last-named, in truth, returned perplexed
 The looks of their confrères so grievous vexed,
 Wond'ring with the knowledge of disaster
 How these emboldened units hoped to master
 A situation minus all success
 For them and other companies. Distress
 Sat upon some faces; others void
 Retorted, for their hearing was destroyed
 By the unsatisfying cannonade
 That day by day the victory had made
 Definite for the armies of the Prince
 Of Germany. Unable to convince
 Their eyes of these advancing troops, they bore
 Into the storm behind the Iron Corps.

A quiet-voiced imposing officer
 Now rode beside the Second to infer
 The cause of its commission. "Çà!" quoth he,
 "It is no use for you to go; the key
 Of wretched Verdun lies in wolfish hands,—
 The Prussian Guard before the city stands!
 'Tis thus too late: our failure is complete."

"What mock is this?! If all the world retreat,
 WE STILL GO ON!" cried Robilleux with heat;
 And, cheering, then the crews denounced defeat
 With all the vigour left in them to challenge
 The god of German war and take revenge.

At sixteen of the clock they saw before
 Fort de la Chaume, and staggered with the roar

Of Teuton batteries breaking close beside
And quiv'ring the terrain with puissant pride.
The blizzard halted. Bitter cold congealed
With this cessation every ice-spun field,
Seeming to intensify the nearness
Of death by this same atmospheric clearness.

The *commandant*,¹—no sooner had report
The Second made at this torpescent fort,—
A mere word gave to speed with all dispatch
To Verdun, then—consultant with his watch—
More detailed added: "On the road you enter
From Bras to Verdun, waiting near the center,
Mon capitaine, will be your further word—
Perhaps to take the lines, may 't please the Lord,
This very night!"

"How far is that?" distressed
By signs of weakness surely 'mong the best
Of troops like these, brave Robilleux inquired,
Gazing on his men so wretched tired.

The *commandant*, uncomprehending-blessed:
"In kilometers—twenty-five," confessed.

"*Mon Dieu*, how can we do it!" groaned the other,
Convinced that less than half of this must smother
His persevering band, and thus frustrate
At Verdun's very gates her phoenix-fate.
"My company is on the road since one,
And rations—wine or brandy—have we none,

¹rank of major in the French Army

Neither food—no, not one morsel! Say
 That in the dread cold venom of this day,
 You saw, *mon commandant*, with passing doubt,
 Half smothered in the drifts and halfway out
 A phantom-crew, that, lab'ring through the well
 Of water, fearing neither shot nor shell,
 Advanced toward Verdun, famished and fatigued,
 'Gainst whom it seemed the very heavens leagued
 In pain or passion France to overcome;
 And say you saw this, if there be then some
 Who question and infer by sundry signs
 That mayhap Robilleux forsook the lines
 When Franco cried, and put his crew to rout
 Among the villages that lag about.
 Recall, if there be traces in the snow
 Likewise if we 're fallen here below
 From sight or sound or perished on the way,
 That six-score men went fearless to the fray,
 Lacking all reserve in food and strength
 Yet driv'n by self-compulsion to this length.
 We go! May God and right decide our potion
 For France in this last hour of devotion."

He headed out the troops. The weary file
 Debouched once more in long columnal style
 Through cheerless damp, and, ever framed by pain
 Upon the ceaseless passing army's train
 Of faces on processional aside,
 Continued the advancement to abide.

The same monotony strode ever forth—
 The same retreat to south of them and north;

From east to west and never toward the east;
 And always the retreat of man and beast.
 The same bombardment and the same terrain
 Rocked fitfully and always white with strain,
 Pressed underfoot, and swelling with emotion
 Like alabaster bosoms of an ocean.
 And not a word passed lip in all that hour
 That held the Second still with some vague pow'r;
 It might have been the utter weariness
 That comes at last with eventide's caress;
 But in the end a grateful sigh escaped
 When Verdun's first contours her outlines shaped,
 As mystical as slumb'rous dawn reposed,
 As faint and shaken as a dew-sprent rose,
 As dim and passionless from that expanse
 As some monastic brother's countenance;
 And, bedded in a valley crushed with hills
 On every side yet succulent with rills
 That sped together in the winding Meuse,
 Received, besieged, the Second Mitraillease.

Ah, Verdun—city—riven with despair,
 What 's hid behind thy virgin's veil a harlotry bids fair!

CANTO V

V
ARGUMENT

"Verdun"

THE Second Company passes through the city of Verdun. Eight miles beyond are the lines. Ruin and desolation are on every hand. The last bridge remaining over the Meuse River is mined by French engineers as the company crosses it. Should the Iron Corps prove ineffectual in stopping the German advance, the bridge will be blown to retard the enemy and the last escape of the defenders cut off! They realize this. Their situation is desperate! Lefèvre, the sociologist, delivers himself of an oration explanatory of their difficulty; but Perclun and other members of the company rejoin with brave spirit and unflinching patriotism. A stream of war-wounded and shell-shocked victims passes them. Havoc sits on every face. Quantities of provisions are strewn over the roads. The very last of the French large batteries is firing, camouflaged, from the woods. A heavy blizzard blows again, the snow concealing the advance of the troops. By midnight they are before the Fortin de Froide Terre, the furthest stronghold of the French, and have been ordered into the lines! They pass through the deepest morass on the western front—*La Vallée de la Mort* (Death Valley), which contains the remains of all those valiant heroes who preferred to die upon the plains of France rather than to retreat before her enemy! Here are the dead, the fatally injured, the partially interred, the partially disinterred. Here is murder and carnage and lust and abortion of life! Through this sour valley the "Iron Division" proceeds. The Second Company is placed directly between those two prominent eminences: *Le Mort Homme* (Dead Man's Hill) and the Côte du Poivre, erecting its mitrailleuses (machine-guns) in the shell-pits or craters of the earlier German *barrage*. Not a French trench remains in condition, not an earthworks, not a wire entanglement! All is shattered, rent and blown! Du Roy calls upon his patroness, the sainted Jeanne d'Arc, to bear witness to the troops' heroism; and the march ends, twenty-seven hours after its inception, with the valiant corps resting on its arms.

V

Shrapnel rent the valley-base asunder,
Exploding *marmites*,¹ venomous with thunder,
Decapitated at each single thrust
Some sodden dwelling on the crater's crust,—
A spectacle of most intense vibration,
Increasing as the troops advanced their station.

They saw the city emanate from mist—
Opaque, then opalescent, then new-kissed
By flame as some bewintered habitation
Gave way beneath the cannons' exultation,
And, shattering with devilish retort,
Spread offal of the blackest, deadest sort
Through all that empyrean chaste above
That strangles hate—when all the world is love—
With gossamers of sunlight, and as well—
When all the world is hate—makes haste to swell
To tears of torment and to overflow,
Like some full-bosomed freshet, sobs of snow.

Unfolded, then, with thrashing detonation,
A picture of the wildest desolation:
A sacrificial township, flagellant,
Unable to rebel or to recant.

The company of Robilleux, resenting
This autograph of Prussia's proud inventing,
Drove forth with all the speed at its command
Across the valley quaked on every hand,

¹literally saucepans, applied to certain German shells because of the peculiar sound they make on exploding

Across the injured streets of which remained
But pitfalls for the lagging feet and pained,
And ventured to the Meuse whose bordered banks
Shone gruesome; where, with ill-concealèd thanks,
Was trod the single bridge that yet outlasted
The fury of the cannonade, unblasted.

“*Mon Dieu!*” cried Raoul Constant with bated breath,—
“What hole is this that welcomes us to death?
The *génies*¹ mine the bridge as we traverse it
That certain doom of destiny may curse it!”

“Be not surprised by that,” Lefèvre, solemn,
Rejoined, the very last man in the column:
“There is no destiny left undefiled
For mother, father, man- or woman-child,
Or state or field or animal or plow,
Or beast of burden, ox or cudded cow,
Or fish within the sea, or toad on land,
Or nightingale in air, or grain of sand,
Or industry, or labour, or design,
Or field of grape, or foaming press of wine,
Or sentiment—emotion or desire
That ’twixt the breasts of humans may conspire
To summon up that passion best promoted
When to the hearth monogamous devoted;
There is no destiny, I say, stock-pure,
Or each or any man or beast secure,
Or thing or thought, since this mad poverty
Called war, but more in truth—insanity!—
Has swept the world. What maelstrom! What corruption!

¹engineering corps

What fetid earthy fester in eruption!
 Is anything now ignorant of slaughter?
 Has France one virgin son? One stainless daughter?
 One soul that can with innocence proclaim:
 'My hands are white!' and say it without shame?
 The most disloyal thing, yet all-embracing,
 Is war, my friend,—the whither we are pacing;
 And I shall shoot and you shall shoot, and others
 Shall shoot at us, and then mayhap like brothers
 Our fratricide will perish in remorse—
 The customary sepulcher of force!
 But meanwhile, battle-bound, make no mistake,
 The destiny poor fools like us partake
 Is neither formed by God or providence
 Nor offered with a thought of recompense
 For trials or sufferings incurred or owed,
 BUT MAMMON IS THE LASH AND GREED THE GOAD!"

Not all of this was understood, alas,
 By Constant, for the cannons seemed to mass
 Just at the crossing as the Second trod
 From off the less firm footing to the sod
 Upon the further bank, and, 'twixt the stagger
 Of this or that still persevering lagger
 From those misguided followers of fear—
 The coward-crews departing for the rear,
 Proceeded through the drifts, scarce less benumbed
 And effortful than they, yet equal plumbed
 With resolution—soul-steeled sufferance:
 The will to rescue or to die for France!

'Twas thus that much the sociologist,
Lefèvre, said evaporized like mist
Above the heads of his confrères. They knew
Alone that he protested as he slew;
That what to them was duty was to him
The workings of a system frightful dim
In righteousness; but fretted not their souls
About the ultimate in human goals.
Enough that each day brought its dismal task,
Theirs to obey but ne'er to think or ask.
And so, alas, is most the world—compliant,
When hearts, if proper probed, would flame, defiant!

Raoul Constant, gaining naught from this oration,
Turned to his neighbour-next for consolation.
"If,"—queried he,—“our cause should fail entire
And we be forced in hurry to retire,
What dismal aspect if the bridge is blown
Before our scattered ranks are hither flown!
No pow'r on earth could save from decimation
Our company; and heaven help the nation!” . . .

“How?! What?! Is it conceivable you foster
Within your breast such malcontent imposter
As failure?!” cried the *poilu*, Perclun, heated:
“The bridge will stand, not fall! And, undefeated,
We'll match our wits against this *génie* corps
By stanching Franco's wounds before the door
Of Verdun. Mark, the mines are useless planted
Beneath the bridgèd floor of yon enchanted
Meuse.”

"Now, brava!" quoth Miette. "Such spirit
Is worthy of our corps; let those who hear it
Quiver for the safety of their foes!"

And once more resurrected from the throes
Of bitterness—the one redeeming t'other
As he, in turn, upbore his erring brother
In earlier despondence—on the road
To Bras and Fleury, as the night bestowed
Her first penumbra 'round the ravished day,
The Second Mitraillease pushed, fever-gray.

Ill sights tore tissues in these fragile breasts:
The most ungracious tragedies and tests—
A steady stream of wounded and war-wasted
Whose sole excuse in living, having tasted
The bitter fruits of Biblical reproof,
Lay in their alibi to stay aloof
From further slaughter now. (Albeit pain
Each sweet-smocked dawn with maunderings to stain
Of this regenerated hour or battle
Whose *you-yous*'¹ steady fling and Mausers'² rattle
Presume from son to son and father, father
To promenade like heritage—a rather
Dubious evolution.) *Camions* came
Full-burdened with grim charges of the same
Crass wreckage—noble sons of future fame,
Their consciences erect on battered, lame
Exteriors. In the roadside, widely scattered,
A tangle of wrenched metal, mixed with shattered

¹German rifle-grenades which travel with a sound like hallooing

²German rifle system

Ammunition, spread; and, further over,
 Artillery *caissons*, reeking 'neath their cover
 Of icy-down with fragments of torn crews,
 Blown hither,—whither? . . . Cargoes, stained with bruise,
 Sunk, disemboweled. Stacks of sugar-wasted,
 And deep-magenta beef, well-carved, untasted;
 Enough to succour half the hungered host
 That bled, and, underfed, bore back; the most
 Commingled cataclysm of torn flesh
 And provender and dung and steely mesh
 That human eye could contemplate! The Second,
 Ghastly in sheer horror, little reckoned
 So sore would be the welcome to the zone
 Of war at Verdun; now stood there alone
 'Mong these sad relics, still for battle fit
 Yet sickened to the core and loathing it!

Before, the pathway cluttered. "*Un moment!*
Marchez par un!" the order came and went!

The rambling ranks in single file debouched,
 Stepped up, and under, hesitated, crouched.
 A sanguine odour flooded the débris
 As if some butcher's whelp, in ecstasy,
 His dev'lish commerce had protracted longer
 Than generally is amiable, and stronger.

They felt a warning skim with sodden fingers:
 "Whom death here graduates to friendship, lingers!"
 And stomped the snow in sudden frenzied haste
 That less should clut their *godasses*. Sharp-paced,
 So dogged their intent, they scarce perceived
 In squads of ten and twenty, undeceived

Despondent troops come, pitiful, bedraggled,
Aimless-eyed and deaf in hearing, straggled,
Crimson-shot and haggard, past their file,
With clothing muddied and appearance vile.

These jerked their bodies, semi-flinched, and cowered
Each time a dense reverberation lowered;
Their nerves so tremulous, so arch-inflamed
By punishment of sound and sight of maimed,
No fortitude of soul could mitigate
The shudd'ring terror of their shell-shocked state.

In catastrophic salutations spewed
Great jets of flame from cannons powder-dewed
Now near at hand—the diligent two-forties,
Uxorious in their constancy, with sorties
Of steel-cased carnage; red from sun to sun:
The last of all the champions of Verdun!

They stood alone. The woods but ill contended
With their harmonious skins, so aptly blended
By virtue of the *camoufleurs*'¹ resource;
And shrilled against the springs of Prussia's force
With ghastly din. Inhuman *marmites* rained
In turn upon their tongues. The Second strained
Through this inferno, mortal-steeled, yet quaking,
A desp'rate valour in the end partaking
Of numbness counterbalanced by some urge
That caused the heart to plunge, the blood to surge!

¹art corps whose business it is to disguise by painting a resemblance
between military objects and their natural surroundings

"*Vite! Vite!*" The cry was passed from those ahead
To those behind, and duly anxious said.

And then in meadows mounded with munitions
And superwrought by shells to hell's conditions,
The mitrailleurs felt first the blizzard's sting
Since earlier its flakes had ceased to fling.
Long slashing drops with lustiness assailed them,
And inconsistent scraps that hailed, then failed, them;
Concealing with their steady blanket stride
All that below which Petain sought to hide;
For which the troops of Robilleux, true grateful,
Deposed to heaven:

"This," they said, "is fateful;
Our progress, 'gainst the enemy directed,
Is thus by hostile aircraft undetected.
The single menace from above is shorn;
And France will resurrect with strength reborn.
'Tis writ! The clouds—the tempests sing in glory!
O wilt, Germania,—retribution 's gory!—
The Fates are on our side!"

In inky black,
A succulent, fresh breeze drove discourse back.
The troops, *sans croute*,¹ *sans pinard* and *sans gnole*,
To Fortin de Froide Terre in midnight stole.

No single increment to failing strength?
No single nutriment?! In its sore length,
The Second Mitrailleuse uncertain swayed
Before the brother-officers here stayed.

¹army bread

But seven men bespoke the total crew
Of Froide Terre, though the Prussians little knew!
Of these no one had ration, since no one
Came forth with ration when the march was done
Of Petain's Iron Corps. Unfed, unhoused,
These heroes, whom the noblest cause espoused,
Sank back into the gloom from which they sprang
When Fortin de Froide Terre her succour sang
Before the gates of hell. One answer only
Came to those burdened souls, so full, so lonely:

"To-night you take the lines!" *The lines to-night!!*
Lips that hung lurid in the dark blanched white!
To-night the lines?! To-night the lines?! Good God
And heav'n protest such tragedy! They trod,
Eyes-watered, flabby-cheeked, and pressed with pain
From knee-joints, leg-joints, arm- and back-, again
Into the open night—the evanescent,
Snow-banked, purple nothingness; depressant
By its very void; surcharged, yet vacant;
Vacant, yet surcharged; and slowly nascent
With that presuming luminance—wet dawn.

Conditioned with fatigue, they still went on—
The hero-troops. Narcosis had them gripped
Like some dim, dusky pond in which has slipped
The soul of man while body aches in slumber
Outside the tomb, yet growing slowly numb-er.
Across a shell-pocked space with beasts and packs—
Unfoddered *échelons*, unfettered *sacs*,
An hundred slugs of whistling lead o'erhead,
An hundred spouting geysers under tread,

An hundred oaths, an hundred morbid fears,
 A thousand nerves gone mad like twinging spears;
 What wonder that, upon that borderland
 'Twixt dark and dawn, 'twixt death and life, unmanned,
 The courage of the marchers ebbed wellnigh
 To that abysmal depth that longs to die;
 Yet, dying, longs to live and wots not why.

They shambled through the troughs. A bursting cry
 Tore wide the tissues of the molten night!
 They quivered—each, sensiferous with fright,
 Palpitant of pulse, with agued spine,
 Drunk in misery: largess not of wine!

A *voiturette* is minus its conductor. . . .
 Blown or scattered by that arch-destructor—
 War, a mildewed monument must stand
 In that worn wilderness: a mangled hand
 Or heart or drop of blood—a single globe
 As erubescant as the princely robe
 Of cardinals, and fully as prophetic;
 Mute protest at the door of the pathetic
 Institution—civilized, so-called:
 Spawn of savag'ry and triple-galled!

In what sour swamp remains this nesting,
 To the pregnant pasture-fields protesting
 Bounded by the valley of the moon,
 Hurtled out of life, and dust too soon,
 Spirit of the winds? Where lie these remnants,
 'Round the base of which the battle chants?

Sons of Thor may callously contend—
Death is theirs to earn and life to spend!

Rapidly, like ghouls on stealthy tread
Ply their dismal trade o'er hallowed dead,
Those half-conscious troops the instinct followed
All the *voiturettes*—in mire wallowed—
To denude; and, mitrailleuse and *sac*,
Partly, or in whole, upon the back
To impose; that, thus, their labour finished,
And with burden fittingly diminished,
Échelons and *caissons* might repair
Backward, well-conducted, to Froide Terre.
Well-conducted—all, that is, save one!

Scarce the night had closed as they were gone
Underneath the shrapnel of the foe,
When, with shoulders drooped as deep with woe
As munitions and machines stacked high,
All the company strode forth to die
Or to conquer on the bleeding plain.

*Boyaux*¹ were there none. 'Twas equal pain
To perceive with sundry slashings 'round
The mischief of the cannons' steady sound
All through the day, all through the night before,
And this night still,—a systematic pour
Of high explosive shells on Verdun's breast,
That blood should flow like milk from either crest—
Côte du Poivre and *Mort Homme*.²

¹communicating trenches

²Dead Man's Hill (304), the most famed position on the western battle front

The din

Waxed calamitous in this *ravin*—
 Slimy, sticky depths, plowed up and up
 And down and down; and never full the cup
 Of slimy stickiness, blood-red, snow-white,
 Mud-brown, gray-green, and powder-black as night;
 A putrid pond made loathsome, foul and reeking,
 Neither of God's behest nor friendship's seeking;
 Swept by moaning winds of lamentation
 Touching light the brow in salutation
 Of these worthy warriors. Guide before,
 Now they plunged into that garden's store
 Of ghastliness: beheaded corpses, growing
 Hard beside a fringe of glaucous, knowing
 Steely bits; and ornamental brass
 From shell-caps blooming here in dazzling mass;
 Wire-mesh and helmets, ricochetting
 Like live things from the batteries' constant whetting,
 And deeper, slower-uninterrèd boots
 And blankets torn from their unstable roots,—
 A whole conglomerate army lying mute
 In battered, indiscriminate, lurking loot.

This was the valley as the Second found it—
 Above, below, before, behind, death bound it!
 No relic seethed that could lie still: likewise
 No atom of the crews that lay could rise
 Save by the outside influence of powder
 From Prussian rifle, mitrailleuse or prouder
 Child of Krupp.¹ Inanimate they lay.

¹reference to Krupp's munition works at Essen, Westphalia

The Iron Corps shrank—shuddered, went its way;
 In snow-swum *mêlée* cognizant became
 A whole colossal tragedy of shame
 Lay here embroidered: Franco units slain
 (By virulent *barrages* in the main)
 In *bataillon*¹ formation!—shorn entire!
 Swept out like so much grain by sickle-fire!

Commingled with the scraps of steel and stone,
 Horses, *caissons*, wagons, carrion, bone,
 Foul rodents glided, feastful and exultant,—
 Deforming ruins into dung repulsant.

Across that grave of horror, fitting-styled
 “La Vallée de la Mort,”—the troops defiled,
 And entered on the trenches.

“*Mon Dieu!*—see!”

It was “The Snuffer” from the Gascony
 Who pointed—cried, and gibberish his voice,
 Coherence lacking, both, and worded choice:
 “They send us, brothers—*mes copains*—to this,
 Where neither are there trenches nor *abris*,²
 Nor order—lines—*artilleurs*—parapets,
 Nor semblance that the front defense begets!
 Here what was high is low; what low is high:
 A lev’ling process only fools decry
 And madmen; shell-holes, shell-pits,—nothing other!
 What outcome can we fashion? Tell us, brother!” . . .

To Du Roy he appealed. In very truth
 The “lines” invited nothing else than ruth.

¹battalion ²dug-outs, i. e., trench residences

The carnage was complete—the *mêlée* shocking;
On every hand inflamed bombardment rocking.
Yet what remained to perish save the Second
And its companion troops?—force scarcely reckoned
By Prussia's High Command; since, unaware,
The Iron Corps crept to the sanguine lair
At Verdun.

Echoes, then,—morose maintained
Within the ears of them so sadly strained!
They planted in the craters, best selected
For depth and those especially well-protected,
Their mitrailleuses; Du Roy dwelling fast
Beside his small command, and giving last
This answer to his *chargeur*¹—Duchêny,
“The Snuffer” from the fertile Gascony:

“Feed well,—aim true, and let the countenance
Of her who shaped the destiny of France,
New-risen from her ashes, here perceive
How Franks their foes' iniquity receive!
'Ils sont tous nôtres! Ayez bon courage!'
*Sus!—Sus!'*² 'Tis written on the ghastly page
At Orléans. . . . a leader's voice—an angel's!—
Of bell-like quality, that swells and swells
And ripples to the infinite: *'Amys!'*
Ils sont tous nôtres! En nom Dé—courage, Fleur-de-Lys!' ”

¹a mitrailleuse crew is composed of *pourvoyeur*, who advances the ammunition, *chargeur*, who loads it, and *tireur*, who fires the gun; a *caporal* (corporal) is in charge, and a reserve crew in readiness to fill the gaps

²purported authentic war-cry of the Maid of Orléans

CANTO VI

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VI

ARGUMENT

"*The First Attack*"

DAWN discovers the 156th Regiment on the left upon the Côte du Poivre, gaunt and hollow-eyed; the 160th is in the region about Fort Douaumont. Two divisions under Petain stand against the Prussian Guard, Germany's greatest fighting unit. With the first light—the blizzard being expended—the position of the Teutons is uncovered. The bombardment has ceased. Germany, convinced all opposition has vanished, is about to begin her boasted investiture of the forsaken city, rifle on shoulder and drumbeat to the front! Silence is over the battleground. A brilliant sunrise floods the district, crimsoning all in expectancy of the coming carnival! Now the German High Command hesitates. What is it has caused the fatal hour—the eleventh—to be struck for Teuton arms with the prize practically in hand? Difficult this of explanation. (The Author advances suggestions.) Too late Germany learns her mistake, she has waited too long—by one hour! This, however, remains to be discovered. Blaise Miette warns the Second Mitrailleur Company: "Not an inch, remember! Do not give back one inch!" His troops await the onslaught. How weary they are! how fatigued! how ill-nourished and spent! They lie in water and mud, frozen to the hips. Introduction is made to another member of the crew, Gai, a *Savoyard*; and the sociologist, Lefèvre, again delivers himself of an oration. Directly, then, the attack is launched! The entire Prussian line rises to advance—is immediately mown down upon the plain. Line after line comes up to the assault—well-drilled, closely-formed units, recruited from the best sections of Germany; they find themselves impotent before the French defenders! It puzzles them: they cannot understand how anything mortal could have stood up beneath their cannonade of four days' duration. So is the battle waged. So does proud Prussia, exploiting her very stanchest troops, lose more than half their number

upon the grisly field at Verdun. And so is France able to withstand—through her noblest sons—this stroke against her heart's best—the Fortress of the East! The first offensive wanes. The second brews. Du Roy, corporal in the Second Company, meets his untimely end, sped by the ghostly presence of the "Maid of Orléans"! In the holocaust that ensues, Lasigny Ardette becomes a shell-shock. Paul Perclun, crazed with the sounds and sights of battle, perceives in the shell-shock his enemy Pierre Raas. A melody comes into his brain. It is the *chanson* of the *poilus* in Charmes-sur-Moselle. Blinded with jealousy he leaps upon Ardette with the intention to strangle him, but succeeds in saving him from death from an exploding shell, which kills Perclun, his rival Raas, and the *Savoyard*, Gai. The shell-shock Ardette wanders about the field, blinded and in mental haze. Miraculously the shells go wide of him. The action of Paul Perclun has been seen by Raoul Constant and Rudolf Delmanhorst, who acclaim him a hero! The second offensive is over. The enemy rests on arms, defeated in the two phases of the unequal battle. The weary defenders sink into lethargy. Lefèvre, the sociologist, who has fought valiantly against his convictions, now perceives the mental suicide of the world—the ages of conflict still holding, since his earliest savage state, the civilized man in bondage. He dreams: the whole universe is in dispute. One figure alone is exempted—the shell-shock Ardette! Some power within him moves. It urges him forward. He crawls upon his hands and knees into the fetid field and rescues therefrom the irresponsible Ardette, drawing him into a shell-hole in which they are both protected from the enemy! . . .

VI

The crimson lips of dawn in pagan proem
 Shot through their amber breath the morning's poem,
 Awake with sumptuous brilliancy! Half-nude,
 White night stood shamed, and, in this attitude,
 Stole out; with clutching hand her midnight mask
 Preparing for its antipodean task.

The twenty-seventh hour had progressed
 By now the Iron Corps past Verdun's crest
 To Verdun's front—that vital twenty-seventh
 That counted in the struggle fate's eleventh!
 At three upon the clock all stood quagmired
 In water to the waist and virgin-tired,
 With, on their left, upon the Côte du Poivre,
 The Hundred-Fifty-Sixth; like gaunt cadavre
 Each member of 't; and in the Douaumont region
 The Hundred-Sixtieth in numbers legion.
 There were, in truth, some sixty thousand men
 In two divisions sent the tide to stem
 At Verdun under Petain; and what hordes
 The German Crown Prince and his august lords
 Assembled, no one could inform—nor can—
 Save Him who is in man yet not of man!¹

Sufficient that the Prussian Guard was placed
 Most advantageous;—that defenders faced
 The greatest unit of developed power
 E'er brought by Cæsar to event or flower!—

¹Marshal Petain has since stated that to his best knowledge five German Army Corps opposed the Iron Corps of France in the first battles in Verdun

An animate machine, so earnest molded
That when with ruthless energy unfolded
It trampled and o'erode at will and pleasure
The treasures of a hearth or equal measure
Upon the battlefield. No line could stem,
(This *boches'* boast was full believed by them—
As well by High Command!)—nor force retard
Th'almighty sinew of the Prussian Guard!

What more befitting, then, that brought to test
It should be 'fore a rival's equal best.
Yet not so equal,—for these *poilus* lag,
Their spirits droop, their virile vigours fag,
Their jowls are flaccid, and their organs ply
But dismally the onus bought "Most High".
Then is the Jovian heart of them uncovered—
The stanch indifference to that death now hovered
Close, and closer that serene they stand
With leaden feet upon the golden sand
To sacrifice!

Then come, exquisite battle! . . .
Let heathen mock,—the sword in scabbard rattle!
Ope wide the erubescant hades door
For Prussian Guard 's in clash with Iron Corps!

Directly, thus, upon the harshest middle,
Prepared to stand the storm, to solve the riddle
Of France's destiny, the Second stood
With mitrailleuses based—a hellish brood!
And saw with wondering dawn's amazed gaze
The German lines in all their myriad maze

Debarked in snow; efficient, yet immobile
 Like Rodin's "*Penseur*"—thinking all the while.
 And this strange spectacle so hard to sort
 From usual war offensives, where the sport
 Of kings is concentrated in the spittle
 Of their consumptive cannons, and the brittle
 Cartridges they spew, and long lines creeping
 Upon the opposition, waking, sleeping,
 Advancing—closing up and up and on
 Without retard until the object's won,
 Touched all at once as some gigantic blunder
 From German High Command to grov'ling Under! . . .

What use these violent *rafales* and *barrages*
 Of lead and other bitter battle gages—
 This lev'ling down of lines, this ceaseless din,
 Exorbitant-priced and reeking red with sin,
 If in the end an hour nullifies
 By hesitance the gaining of the prize?

An hour's time—a single hour! Heaven,
 That lashed the Iron Corps to twenty-seven,
 Must in the end some pity for its plight
 Have pledged with all the Franco ranks in flight,
 And dazed the High Command or shorn its pow'r
 That Verdun should survive her fatal hour! . . .

Suffice it, Friedrich Wilhelm's star was set
 Against the final noosing of this net:
 In ardour he imposed his batteries' breath,
 In vacillance delayed in fear of death
 From mines—or God knows what!—his troops' advance,
 And thereby lost Verdun, and, likewise, France!

'Twill never satisfactory be decided
 Why Germany her chance so badly bided.
 Unarmed, or arm on shoulder—not at aim,—
 She could have won her point and forced her claim.
 Instead, 'neath flaking snow and hunger perilled,
 She allowed the Iron Corps with dawn as herald
 To re-invest the lines—the forts—the city!
 Such clumsiness 's deserving sure of pity!

The scarlet morn, her rouged cheeks flaming shameless
 As any courtesan, though someway blameless,
 Pursued, aglittering from the horizon,
 Her path of jewels behind the ruby sun.

What vanity may this way be betrayed
 When pearls of dew are amorously laid
 About the neck of night; and, flushed with morning,
 Their mistress of the sabler tresses scorning,
 Rewaken, ravished from their raven couch
 By her whose limpid breath is Venus' touch!

The Second stood beneath this firmament,
 Emblazoned with an ardour of intent
 No less glowing than its passionate rival—
 The day; expectant of the carnival
 Soon to impend.

Miette from Arras studied,
 Feet wide apart, the hostile distance, ruddied.
 His gaunt face and fanatic eyes an oath
 Of slaughter multiplied. What frenzy both
 Betrayed! What zealotry! What madman's fire!
 And scorn and laughter blent with blood desire!

He turned his slit-smile cautiously about
To right and left like surreptitious scout;
Addressed those nearest:

“Not an inch! Remember,
Though Christ walk, and the very skies hot ember
Shed! Stand! Let the ranks of hell
Their dearest product 'fore our bulwark fell—
No higher bid their blood to barter begs
Than this: the cannons' lowest, bitt' rest dregs!
Make no advance—there 's no advance to make,
We neither can nor will the ramparts take
Of yonder wood. The *boche* may stand or fall
Opposing us, we harken not his call;
For fewer are we far than his -score masses
And unsupported for what further passes
There might accrue. Until the last man—stand!”

And every heart that heard was fervour-fanned;
And every soul responded: “To the last!”
And every body racked; and each eye cast
Ahigh one look and then ahead the balance
Prepared for desperation in advance,
And welcoming both death and living chance.

Intrepid Robilleux the countenance
Of one whose duty 's well-defined assumed.
Annihilation for the Second loomed,
He felt, complete; and sadly him bethought
How poor a vict'ry is the poorest bought!—
How poor the richest, then! . . .

He heard Raas say:
 (Pierre Raas whose face was old, whose hair was gray
 At twenty-two!) "*Combien vivront demain?*
 Ha! *Numerote tes abatis, copain!*
Tu bouffes le pisenlit par les racines!"¹
 And found it hard to reconcile the lines
 Of hardship on the young man's face with these
 Light words, perceived to shock, pronounced to tease.

Saw Perclun pale—his eyes go wide with dread;
 And Lasigny Ardetto, half-faint, ill-fed,
 Reel with his bands in slashing mud and mire—
 A *pourvoyeur*, and loading up for fire;
 And close beside a *Savoyard*² who hummed
 Small snatches of a song from lips that numbed—
 A bar-room ditty in a minor key
 Of rather dubious birth and decency.

Lefèvre crouched behind his mitrailleuse,
 His face sarcastic, bitter, *douloureuse*,
 As if to say: "That comes, my friends, from living
 'Mongst swine and all their dirty, crass conniving;
 See what comes out. And yet what 's to be bred
 To stand in pig-filth here until you're dead?!
 Foul *totos*³ swarm the back, foul grapes the liver—
 And God they worship as the bounteous Giver!" . . .

¹literally, "Number your legs, my friend!"—meaning it will be a grave time, i.e., you will be shot apart and the various portions set together by number (a *poilu* expression); as well "*Tu bouffes*," etc., which is "Eat the salad by the roots!"—a dead (or buried) man

²native of the province of Savoie, southeastern France ³trench lice

This discourse, self-indulged, the scientist
 Of social evolution scarce the gist
 Himself perceived of, ere the blooming morning
 A rack and tatter bore no sophist's scorning
 Could set aside! The sibilance of shells
 In churned decadence and in foaming wells
 Of wat'ry mud that rose in spewing flues
 From craters stript of all their morning's dews,
 Convinced the Second ere a breath's suspense
 That here in fine was Prussia's great offense—
 And last—'gainst Verdun offered. None betrayed
 An instant's hesitation; spirit prayed
 While brain and hand leapt to th' accustomed place
 At this machine-gun or that vacant space
 Upon the feeding band.

“THEY SHALL NOT PASS!”

The oath was born as Prussia rose en masse
 Along the whole grave line—one gray-green field
 Surtopped with helmets, spiked and bluish-steeled,
 Triumphant like a host about to enter
 The city, lodging at its very center
 With little opposition. Little dreamed
 These sturdy warriors that the plain, so-seemed
 Deserted, housed of all the numerous store
 Believed retreated,—*France's Iron Corps!*
 So stealthy had th' investiture proceeded
 That not an inch of ground was here conceded
 Behind the ordered space: eight miles beyond
 The city, through its putrefactive pond—
 “La Vallée de la Mort.”

The vanguard lifts!
 The parapet before according rifts;
 And shoulder side by side, and forward glancing,
 The great Teutonic war machine 's advancing!
 Comes on—comes on—unending, undenied,
 Undoubting even it will be defied
 By one explosion,—since it thinks no thought
 At all: Bavarian units are so taught,
 And Saxon, Schleswig-Holstein, and Schwerin,
 And Brandenburg and Hessen and Stettin
 (Which volunteers the lineal descent
 Of Frederick, King of Prussia's, regiment—
Die grossen Pommeraner!); Posen, too,
 And Württemberg contingents, and the few
Badenser.¹ Not the whole of these, nor others
 Remaining still unnamed though feudal brothers,
 Approach upon the ill-conditioned Franks
 At Verdun, though the automatic ranks
 Pledge blood no less enormous on this 'count.

They sweep superb and energized, like fount
 Expelling living-water, to the crest
 Of zenithed heroism—frank of breast
 Before the mitrailleuses, fully lined!

The arch-defenders gasp! Feel half-inclined
 To yield another moment this fair host
 To life, ere blotting out the prisoned ghost
 From its finite restrictions. But the mood
 Passes as eddy ebbs in frenzied flood.

¹provinces, cities, etc., of the German Empire

Torrential is the flame—stark, baking heat
 And powder-dust with leaden spume replete!
 A single flash speeds from the quaking soil!—
 A second—third—ten—hundreds in turmoil!
 Reeking, raking fumes of burnished spite
 Let loose in one mad tempest of delight!
 The mitrailleuses sing. What grisly song!
 What catastrophic hail the ranks among
 Now riots!—Teuton ranks, confused, confounded
 By these spontaneous tongues so raucous sounded!

The Iron Corps feeds—feeds in straining zeal,
 In half-fanatic lust feeds steel with steel;
 And, from the socket-nozzles thus inflated
 Pukes out that death so little Prussian rated.
 Fed—fired, the grinding nausea yearns to spread,
 Rank follows rank, and heaping dead, heaped dead!
 From cannon-mouths new planted, rifle-bores,
 Machine-guns—St. Etienne¹—the venom pours!
 Emaciated, twitching mouths and eyes
 And fingers, brows and ears their fears despise
 Among the Franks. What fearful dream is this
 That launches men, full-budded, the abyss
 Of dissolution down? What churning shame?
 What mortal combat for immortal fame?

The horror grows. The German foemen reel—
 Ground out 'neath their ambitious ruler's heel.
 Warm bullets beat their breasts, warm blood their tongues,
 Cold sweat their brows, and colder steel their lungs!

¹French mitrailleuse system, invented 1907

Mirages float before their glazing vision:
 Pale tapestries of *Heimath* in derision;
 Rebuked by saturnalia's leering blush:
 The tritulating cannons' steady gush
 Upon their foaming files. Immense the cost!
 Immense the casualty, albeit lost
 In foemen! Spirit-world, ablaze with light
 And numbers, welcomes hordes to her midnight!

The straggling, semi-drunken Second stood
 Through all this drenching pain and bartered blood
 Supreme upon that portion of the field,
 Shell-sought, shell-shrunk, yet uninclined to yield.
 Above, a vaulting volley stroked the air
 And smote the valley-base with rousing tear!
 Shrill whimpers rose—but not from these defenders;
 'Twas resonant among the valley's splendours—
 Old-wounded, freshly-tortured candidates
 For heav'n or hell—fate resting with the Fates!
 All were reground, rebroke, revomited,
 Cast up, flung down upon their restless bed.

The first assault congeals its waning strength,
 Driv'n back and forth, and back again at length.
 A parapet has raised, suggestive-grayed
 With bodies of hero-Teutons villain-played
 In their self-chosen rôles. The shell-pocked plain
 Is swept by Franco marksmanship again
 And yet again; and then the signals pass:
 "Conserve your fire while the Prussians mass!"
 'Tis but too plain the second offensive brews.

“Good God, were this but strategy or ruse!”
Thought Du Roy, nestled 'mid the sunken crews:
“Had we but strength sufficient to enthuse
Our man-pow'r and our ammunition both!”

He meant by this the units under oath
To stand or fall 'fore Verdun. Fainting troops,
Whose morale rises as their number droops;
Whose ammunition sadly finds no fount
To resurrect its parching, dwindling count.

He sought toward left some cognitive advice
Where smoke obscured the too-expensive price
Of one exploding *arrivée*.¹ Charred embers,
No doubt, should here replace the gun's late members!—
Poor broken crews! . . .

A thunder of fled lead
Casts up, across, and narrow overhead—
Teutonic harbinger of fresh advance!
Immense concussion mortifies his glance,
Clasps both his shoulders, dazzles and dismays him,
Sends seething heat and cold, and then betrays him!
He spins like dizzy top, his tortured brain
Refusing further to record the pain
That burrows through his flesh. In that foul breath
From Prussia's hæmal regions, hot with death,
Brave Du Roy dies,—his senses final sped
By beating wings and sweeping hosts of dead!
Or is it—silver-pure—a milk-white dove
That leaps from burning pyre to heav'n above,

¹German shell

Exulting? And a leader's voice—an angel's!—
Of bell-like quality that swells and swells
And ripples to the infinite: "*Amys!*
Ils sont tous nôtres! En nom Dé—courage, Fleur-de-Lys!"

Courage! What passing Presence's awfulness
Is swept like immortality's caress
Across the brows of war? What subtle grief
In brilliant plumage stalks the sombre reef?
These powder-darkened, fetid ponds and places?
These fervour-lightened, half-fanatic faces?

Concerted then, as this appearance pends,
A moan arises through the ranks, and spends;
The Second weeps in silence, dry of eye,
Yet full in heart with tears of bloody dye.
Within the morbid, hallowed, vacant space
Remains nor relixed dead nor battle trace
Where recent lodged so valiant a soul.

Whither flown, *caporal*, to what earned goal?
Yonder lies, in company with more,—
Them that perished with thee and before,—
A shape—it once was thine; a hand, an arm,
A throat, a cheek—resemblance marks harm
When one has fled like thee! But, heart-of-God,
Take courage! Spirit 'habits not the clod,
Thankfully, for aye. . . .

And as he died,
Pierced with shrapnel—military's bride,—
Alone a leaden hail his shroud composed.

Four moments consequent is Prussia dozed
As if regardful of this passing's worth;
Then breaks a holocaust baptismal forth
Of all the pits of hell! . . . Disgorging ire,
Vengeful and replete with woe's empire,
Line after line, endeavouring to assault,
Is brought to speedy humbleness and halt!

The *poilu*, Perclun, ankle-deep in mire,
Knees and waist in water, chilled entire,
Perceived ere long that Lasigny Ardette,
His *pourvoyeur*—assigned by Blaise Miette,
When early casualty bestrode the gun
Next over, saving of the crew but one—
This same Ardette!—a shambling gait betrayed,
Shuddered, vacant-glanced, and sang and swayed.

He saw the fringe of Teutons mowed like grain,
Collapse, fresh-sickled, to the palsied plain,
Their helmets ricochetting; elbows, knees
Out-jutted, locked in death by slow degrees
In many cases; others, snarled and tangled
In amputated suddenness, foul-mangled;
Sitting, standing, lying, lurching over,
Headless, torsoless, in snow-blanced clover;
Some with smirking smiles and some without,
Some in terror and no less in doubt;
Every one with gaping, wicked wounds,
Fertilizing France's chest in mounds
Most enormous, most congested. . . . Dead—
The whole soul of their martialism fled!

Soon those behind but farce in war displayed
 To Perclun. . . . Farce, that was it—FARCE! He sprayed
 To right and left his mitrailleuse, before,
 And up and down, and gloated at the score
 That fell—a further line and then another
 No diff'rent and no less disposed to smother;
 No hardier, nor able to withstand;
 Driv'n on by desperation and command.

Up came the stream, too rigid, too unbending,
 Grew tenuous with slaughter never-ending
 Beneath his gun—'neath every other gun
 That ground and churned, was done, and never done!
 He fired to the rhythm of a song
 He rather felt than heard—it gripped him strong,
 It seemed to hark from somewhere, yet nowhere;
 Then saw he Lasigny Ardette was there! . . .
 His lips were moving,—what was it that came?—
 He now remembered! *Jesu!*—'twas the same
 In Charmes-sur-Moselle!

Like a flash returned
 Paul Perclun's thoughts to those of lover spurned;
 Saw Mariette—saw Pierre Raas, arm in arm
 Beside the meek Moselle in charming Charmes!

The crashing of his arch-obedient organ
 Of life or death and its effect on man
 No longer served to occupy or haunt him,
 But rather thoughts of Mariette to taunt him.
 The steady rumble and the popping bray
 And thrashing, smashing tumult of the fray

'Fore Verdun; the ensanguined, morbid field;
 The heaping dead, the Teutons backward reeled;
 The draining life-blood; fast-exhausting Second;—
 Alike drew far away. Soft music beckoned
 In place of these to Perclun—bound about him,
 Coerced his pulse—his brain; commenced to shout him
 In the ear! His eyes grew glazed—distended
 Awaiting sounds of song that never ended;
 Barbaric dissonance instead their flow—
 More so—and more—insanely—madly so!
 His swollen veins rebelled—his senses clotted;
 In mottled greenish-red his vision spotted,
 And all at once he leapt! . . . Yes, up he leapt
 To where a twitching form its vigil kept
 Beside a mitrailleuse. Ah, fearful note!
 He shrieked with pleasure at his victim's throat:
 "*Crève, sale vache!*¹—*hé-hé—Pierre Raas!*"

With fingers

Cunningly his prey clasps—loving lingers,
 Intent upon the apple . . . chokes and sobs,
 And presently his strangling rival robs
 (Or so he thinks) of life. Coincident
 In one vast detonation blood is blent
 With steel-dust, man with man-dust, bone with bone,
 Rib with rib, and, molded into one,
 Heart with heart beneath the crimsoned pile
 Wrought out of similars, twin crews awhile—
 Yet oh so shortly back!

¹low epithet

Then is Raas flung
 Into the trough conglomerate; there wrung
 Of all his agony of partial life—
 Of that harsh period wherein vigour's strife
 Is clashed 'gainst death's erosion. Close beside
 The *Savoyard* is hurtled with the tide
 High up on Lethe's shore. Paul Perclun sinks,
 Himself a victim of the fate that shrinks
 From no man, neither high nor low nor proud,
 Fortune-centred, poverty-endowed,
 Courageful, nor cowardly; intent
 Alone on him whose destinies so blent
 With his misshapen own—Pierre Raas, his brother,
 Born of the same *patrie* though different mother!
 Bred in the same dementia—Herod's kin,
 Whose Infant Christ 's the peace so laved in sin
 Yet resurrectant still. Together slain,
 These three merge skeletons and brawn and brain
 Eventual for antiquity's research—
 Th' uncovering of hell's divinest smirch:
 When stoop-backed, musty archæologists,
 Their lenses poised to penetrate the mists
 Of Satan and the workings of that plan
 Called Organized Society by man,—
 Refurnish bodies from the fragments rotted,
 That museums may employ their full allotted
 Dignity, and generations weigh
 The depth of skull these specimens display!

In maelstrom such that none perceived his struggles,
 The *pourvoyeur*, Ardette, his presence smuggles,

From out the ghastly heap; like serpent twists
 And writhes his body from the ruddy lists,
 Lungs harsh congested, bloody-black his face,
 Yet life within him by the Godhead's grace
 That every dicer knows! Not one beside him
 In that foul hole but living is denied him;
 Not one but spreads his corse in full disgust
 Upon the terms that treason's boycott must.
 Contending armies buckle and give way,
 Sway up and back, their venom of the day
 Dispensing; pyrotechnics burst the air;
 Shell-shatters fall in tatters and despair;
 New hollows form, and lowered pits arise,
 Columnar in their foaming dust's surprise;
 Descending terror frights each perilled group:
 Defenders and attackers likewise droop,
 Disseminated; yet the ridges swell
 Before the bold attackers not so well;—
 In metre lengths these fall and heap a metre
 High along this parapet, far fleeter
 To greet the cold, wet lips of dissolution
 Than those of French descent and resolution.

The Teuton hordes appeal—appeal in vain
 From this too harsh decision 'gainst their slain.
 The more they postulate, the graver sentence;
 The massacre grows ever more intense!

Above o'ersprays the firmament with fire
 Both nature-born and reaching ever high'r
 Into its zenith, jealous to deflect
 The anguish at its feet to throat bedecked.

Long scarlet streams coerce the souls of men
Like hungry mistresses from slaughter's den
To that so pleasurable high resort
Where sun and stars connubially consort.

How pitiful the massed terrain beside!
How shrunken man's estate in all its pride
Of war! How frail the passions that presume
Themselves to spin on providence's loom!

Bloodlet, Germania perseveres for gain,
In onomatopœtic bursts of pain
Alike unheard by *Bundesrath*¹ or crown;
For what are doom and din when kingly sown
To mere canaille? What cogitates Berlin
While Côte du Poivre lavishes in sin?
Undoubted shakes with anger—not in dread:
As long as there are lives there'll go unfed
No single gun! . . . 'Twere sacrilegious other
Than this to obligate; as well to smother
Ambition's yearnings. Wherefore count the cost
When victory is momentary tossed
Like bubbles in the air? These ravages
Go hand in hand with kings and cabbages!

Ardette, poised like a wraith among the shambles
With fluent death before, to rear the gambols
Of the carousing mitrailleuses, still
Subservient to the erubescient will
Of their demented masters, saw no sight
Beneath his feet—saw nothing else but night

¹the federal council of the German Empire

To right of him, to left, afore, behind;
 Heard neither cannons' spew nor ghastly grind;
 Felt of his throat, involuntary mumbled,
 Reached out imploring fingers, groped and stumbled,
 And lay and rose again; with all his might
 Stroved to discriminate,—saw only night:
 Black void surcharged with nauseating vapour
 That clutched his nostrils with its brutish odour
 And sent him whimp'ring forth. He knew not whence.

Raoul Constant thus beheld his countenance,
 And him beside, immune upon the plain,
 Pace up and down not relevant nor sane,
 But scorning in self-evident disdain
 The streaming bullets and their leaden pain.

"Great God!" cried he to Delmanhorst, "what charm
 Protects yon crazed marauder from the harm
 That bloody battle brings? How comes it he
 Should thus escape the fateful tragedy
 That late engulfed our comrades—Paul Perclün
 And Raas and Gai, the *Savoyard*,—not one
 Of whom survives? Together foul they rot,
 Blast-ridden in this death-accursèd spot,
 And not one saddened eye to shed a tear
 And not one breast to bear their souls from here,
 Soft-nestled in despair! . . .

"O woman hearts
 And mothers', whom the dying last departs
 In anguish from upon the battlefield,
 Your velvet bosoms be prepared to yield

Once more to lamentation—battle's barb,
When carnage in her elemental garb
Becrimsons earth!"

This last appeal addressed
The mournful young defender toward the west
Where dwelt, no doubt, those recently bereaved
Of kin for whom the dying *poilus* grieved.

"Rest well, my *frangin*, take it not so deep,"
Replied the youthful Delmanhorst: "nor weep.
Yon crazed marauder—charmed, as you declare—
Owes life to that poor carcass resting there
In sorry semblance of his living whole.
A hero is Perclún while minus soul!
His legs are fraying stumps; his bowels exposed;
His head to awkward side instead reposed;
His arms, alone, are partially attached,
Yet one is short, the other illy matched.
'Twere hard to find a more repellent sight—
Save him who rests beside: Pierre Raas last night!
To-day: Pierre who? He was a good *tireur*,
And with this Gai—an excellent *chargeur*—
No mean opponent. Now is he, alas,
Not even man, but decomposing mass.
Nor hero neither! . . . 'Twas the other one—
I saw him leap—the *poilu*, Paul Perclún—
Ere Krupp his missile sped. Yes, up he leapt
To where a twitching form its vigil kept
Beside a mitrailleuse! *IT WAS ARDETTE!*
He pressed him underneath the parapet

Of their demolished hole. Coincident
 In one vast detonation blood was blent
 With steel-dust, man with man-dust, bone with bone,
 Rib with rib, and, molded into one,
 Heart with heart beneath the crimsoned pile
 Wrought out of similars, twin crews awhile—
 Yet oh so shortly back!"

"Is this then true?"

As listener, Lefèvre likewise drew
 Within th' allotted ear-space; for again
 Had Prussia her Gethsemane in vain
 Opposed. In vain her second thrust surpassed
 By sanguine eloquence and lust the last.
 A hideous odour rose, and fell contour
 Cast up of bodies cluttered like ordure.

In mounded masses—patterned intricate—
 And massing mounds that lay in nowise straight,
 But heaped and hurled as bodies heap and hurl,
 And tear and trample as they weep and whirl—
 All living, dead; and dead—inhuman corpses:
 So lay the remnants of the German forces—
 The fast decaying scraps—the butchered clan
 That fought and withered—stricken to a man!

France rested on her laurels. Hours passed
 And further hours, and the foes amassed
 Still greater depth to their chagrined morale
 That weight of flesh should overwalk *rafale*
 And death-*barrage* of their opposing host.
 But singularly frivolous each boast.

During all this preparation stood Ardette
 Or walked beside the loathsome parapet
 Of slain, as innocent of thought or fear
 As sight or sound and living far or near.
 At times small whimpers rippled from his frame
 Which battle-sound accordingly o'ercame,
 And caused the trio, dumb with stupefaction,
 To marvel at the most uncanny action
 Of both their comrade and th' oppugnant rage
 Of guns that sought 'gainst him no war to wage!

Lefèvre listened while at length discoursed
 The young Alsatian, Rudolf Delmanhorst,
 On Perclun's sacrifice; and, hence, due debt
 Accruing him from Lasigny Ardette.
 'Twas not within the sociologist
 Heroics to imprint upon his list
 Of human frailties, nor saw he other
 In war than caused his very soul to loathe her!

He harkened, black of brow, with small comment
 As this or that within the version lent
 Itself to eulogy; saw night impose
 Her moribund decision on the rows—
 Cold rows of colder carrion; felt the chill
 Re-echo from those silent teeth that will
 In spite of all, imaginary, chatter.
 Dead foes—dead rows; he heard at once the clatter
 Of martialism,—saw the storming arms
 Of æons in dispute! the world's alarms
 Gone crashing—mad, together! Dozed, and dreamt
 A single figure was alone exempt

From all this furnace heat. He saw him sway—
 The night marauder, stumble, mumble—pray,
 Fall prone, lie stretched, arise in silhouette—
 Cry out—O God! *'Twas Lasigny Ardette!*
 Still wandering—still living 'mong the dead—
 Still whimpering—still following, unled,
 Some subtle leadership, some psychic path
 Through Verdun's first attack, and aftermath!
 And rose—he knew not how—across the pit
 Where gun-crew lay in mire, unknowing it:
 Upon his hands and knees Lefèvre went
 On what inspired heroism bent
 Himself could not have told; through stagnant stacks
 Of human flotsam, jetsam—sourèd sacks
 That moaned suggestively at times for water
 As if parched to the roots by savage slaughter;
 Past whitish faces, staringly upborne
 In challenge to the stars; past eyes of scorn,
 And eyes of rage, and eyes and eyes and eyes—
 That looked and stared, and never in surprise;
 And hanging jaws, and shuttered jaws, and skull-bones;
 And mouthing gibberish and jargled groans;
 And golden hair and silver hair, and helmets
 That rakish set, and further over jets
 Where still a monster cannon, half-awoke,
 Saluted Verdun with laconic stroke.

Upon his back deployed the single blue
 Among the gray-green uniforms that grew
 So liberally about. A rocket's flare
 Discerned him, crouched, immobile, well-aware

Of danger. In horizon-bluish dress
 This rescuer? The rescued one no less
 Must 'habit blue! . . . He lifted up discreetly
 And sought about beneath the *Bengal*¹ fleetly
 For Lasigny Ardette. A whisp'ring sigh
 Came close, passed over—wind caressed him by! . . .
 He knew not by what space he this escaped,
 He knew not by what destiny was shaped
 His backward course; knew only that beside
 Himself, one other *poilu* death defied
 In that far open meadow. Sought, and found him—
 This brother of his skin! Advanced, and bound him
 With eager cautious arms! Like Jean Valjean,
 Upon his shoulders hoisted him unseen;
 And through the bruised and supernatural night
 Stagg' red, with cannon-sewage left and right,
 And sobbing sounds and shrieking wind and lead,
 Into the sump that sheltered them like sepulchers their dead.

¹illuminating rocket

CANTO VII

VII

ARGUMENT

"The Last Attack"

TWO further attacks on the part of the Prussians on the second day are repulsed by the gallant French. Lefèvre and his charge, Ardette, are forced to remain in security between the lines, hidden from both sides. (The Author dissertates upon the shell-shocked state.) The Second Mitraillease Company suffers further hunger and fatigue "with back against the wall"! Its first-lieutenant shows great bravado in the face of German marksmanship but escapes unscathed. The blizzard recommences. With it the fifth offensive! More enormous than any of its predecessors, the catastrophic attack is repulsed like the first, second, third and fourth; and the Prussian units are slaughtered in a sanguineness and riot such as cannot be eclipsed! This—then—the retort! France has been faced with five times her numbers and has triumphed through the valour of her "Iron Division"! The Second Mitraillease Company loses two complete gun-crews in this battle. Introduction is made to the *sous*-lieutenant (junior-lieutenant), a *Mulhause*, who meets death after a strange manner. Captain Robilleux receives a serious wound which incapacitates him for further action. (The Author proposes him for the Hall of Fame, satirizing the custom of immortalizing the dead alone!) And the *poilu* Duchêny dies upon his knees in the attitude of worship. Thus is the German offensive crumpled to nothingness; and, reinforcements arriving, the chief-lieutenant is allowed to retire the heroic Second Mitraillease Company, which, along with the balance of the Iron Corps, vacates its positions to the fresh French troops, departing Verdun, March 9th, 1916.

VII

Between the lines, as broke the second day
Her lightsome corsage—freer for the fray,
There lay two men, who neither spoke nor fought
Nor ate nor drank nor sang as soldiers ought
When victory is nigh; who, unafraid,
Dwelt in their shell-pit as the battle swayed
From side to side—from victor to defeated
And back to victor as subdued retreated.

The fertile plain dots with increased emotion—
With further signs of daring and devotion.
Teutonic strives with Gallic; in defense
Ejects each hadcan mitrailleuse its dense,
Destructive hail. A vortex of disaster
Absorbs proud Prussia! Tons of terror cast her
Both up and out in molten gurgitation—
An orgy minus end or satiation!
The third, the fourth attacks, as first and second,
Dispatch their gleaming rows; in little reckoned
Space succumb. Decapitated spectres
Succeed the gaunt, determinated sectors:
Spread offal stench; spasmed shrieks propel
With each discharge their fragments to the well
Of dissolution! Wide the units rip,
Break, explode, slash down, glide out and dip
Beneath the putrid ponds! Soul follows soul,
And rancid body, body, to extol
Upon the virtues of that honour saved
To safeguard which is living God betrayed!

The two within the shell-hole ventured not
 By hand or head to lift above the spot
 Self-sought by one, at least; dared not by breath
 To agitate those vehicles of death
 That bid us all: "Begone!" The tumult writhed,
 Whole fields of men with leaden sickles scythed,
 And mad miasma reeking full and stale
 With every stench and sweat that lives entail
 When perishing. All this, together bound,
 Cast morbid anxiousness and loathsome sound
 On these two Franco brothers—prisoners
 As safe enchained as any tomb inters.

The shell-shock, Lasigny Ardette, crouched low,
 Yet not from terror nor the things that grow
 Enormous in the imaging of brains
 Diseased from battle's awfulness and strains,
 But sheer exhaustion. On the other hand,
 Expressionless Lefèvre took his stand—
 Moved neither by the seething battlefield
 Nor leaden spume nor spray nor ghastly yield.
 He felt the tired bullets make contact
 With helmet and *gamelle*,¹ yet either lacked
 Sufficient energy to plow a path,
 Or recognized in him no foeman's wrath! . . .

Suffice it that he lived, and so Ardette—
 A shudd'ring shock no longer save when set
 Upon by some rebounding devilkin
 That twinged him like a conscience pricks with sin.

¹tin-pan for food, part of soldier's equipment

Then gave he issuance to that harsh sound
 That mutes are most accustomed to propound:
 A halfway measure 'twixt an "awk" and "gob"
 That causes hearts to clutch and souls to sob.
 So dim his eyes meanwhile that optic nerve
 Succumbed ere long to fatal spinal swerve
 And ebbd completely, writing thus with fate
 Another chapter on the shell-shocked state—
 Torpescent blankness of the vital senses
 When morbid cruelty too grave intensens.

And stands beside the glory of the battle,
 The carnival of death: the throaty rattle
 That just precedes it, and the strangling tone
 When steel has plowed through flesh and blood and bone;
 Or, worse!—into the parapet deflected
 That nerves of jelly-substance are affected
 And likewise scream and rend their owner so
 That death were far the kinder of the blow.

Is it to be conceived more painful pass
 Than this to come a-to?—a living mass
 Disjointed in the fibre, yet anoint
 Of God in every other part and joint! . . .

The Second Mitrailleuse, sore-shaken, feinted
 The various fresh attacks; remained untainted
 Of either backward step or backward look,
 Or backward thought was even prone to brook.
 Successful swam the brass-capped angels out,
 Nor long remained the consequence in doubt.
 It is not possible to override
 Such leaping, lashing, omnipresent tide;

Such resolute stone-men; such settled jaws;
Such abnegation to a common cause.
The bulwark held, as bulwarks seldom fall
When built of men with backs against the wall!

Not one small morsel passed their lips in food
The forty hours previous, nor was blood
Of wine composed that rushed into the plain
From those exterminated soldier-slain
Among the French. Both *bidon*¹ and *musette*²
Impov'rish'd hung; like-mannered each *binette*,
The shrinking hollows of starvation's print
But all too clearly mirrored in its stint.
Eye-sockets raised, their sinking balls abjured,
And malar bones from which the flesh was lured,—
Cadav'rous wretches in the shadows crouching
Where mitrailleurs of France should be debouching.

Miette himself, cheek-sunk, employed a gun
Wherefrom had partial of the crew outrun
Its usefulness—been blasted and deceased
And left its 'customed places to increase
The march on purgatory. Hair upstanding
Like tiger, bristled—every ounce demanding
Slaughter from the foe—red murder—lust!—
The chief-lieutenant impudently thrust
His madman's head above the crater's edge,
Where, bare of covering, it topped the ledge
And drew a careful offering; then sank—
But innocent of injury—to flank

¹canteen

²canvas bag for reserve rations, fork, spoon, etc.

The lone *tireur* within the cavity,
Fresh war to wake among the enemy.

He rose and fell, and shatt'ring streams spurred on,
Sprang from the bands, tore out, and hurtled—gone!
The fourth offensive buried with the third
And still no pace had Petain's veterans stirred;
No inch of ground surrendered; and no breast
Withdrawn before the Fortress of the East.
Defended stood Verdun, and clutched at last
That breath which signifies the crisis past

And so it was. A lifeless sky o'erspread
The frigid tone of night, and, ere dawn, bled
With slow monotony and palish hue
A whole fresh blanket of dissilient dew
Iced into snow-drops. Rationed food appears
From messengers, and word of those arrears—
The reinforcements, all too tardy bated
Upon the road, and frightfully belated.

The fifth offensive starts. The vagrant crews
Forgather strength and courage with the news,
Prepared to combat, pasty-lipped and gray,
Their title to the anguish of the day.

A steady beating of the batt'ries bears
Above the quiv'ring Mausers. Krupp prepares
For battle with enormous dirge and thunder,
Intent the still-defending ranks to plunder
Of mettle and morale. As usual rises
The multitude of infantry,—despises

The narrow ranks of French, the cratered jets
Of mitrailleuses minus parapets
Or any set or form; through vapour-curtain
Like strewing ash, dull-wavering, uncertain,
Advances To the heapings in relief
Deploys, and hesitates a trifle—brief,
Astonished at the brusqueness of the play;
Disgusted at the corpses on display

Preludes then France her sanguineness with riot
Complete and energetic—fatal diet!
The mitrailleuses spray—the heavens rock!
The plains grow fertile underneath the shock!
The belching line ejects; the foemen spin!
The *bois* reverberates with doom and din!
No longer are there Teuton lines and French;
No longer barbed entanglements and trench.
No longer does the German State propose
This meagre obstacle to light dispose
Like clouds before her face. 'Tis fair apparent
The mighty Prussian war machine is spent!
Its stern foundation bends, deserts, descends;
Its sound formation quivers, bursts and rends;
Its most unconquerable front is riven,
In screaming cataclysm backward driven
Or shriveled on the field!

Though not entire
Conceives the Twentieth this rout transpire.
Harsh breakage has betided here meanwhile:
Both infantry and gunnage suffers bile,

But not so arch-intense. Two gun-crews out
 Bring home to Robilleux the dear, devout
 Splendour of their service. Further loss
 Entails the *sous-lieutenant*—one of gross
 Proportions physically, finer strain
 In mind—a *Mulhause*,¹ eager to arraign
 His German masters on the proper footing
 When not an Alsace or a Belgium looting.

He severs at the waist—his upper corse
 Unseated, like a rider from his horse,
 And slipping to the earthway, slyly cut
 By shrapnel fragments in the proper rut
 To still preserve some semblance of the whole,—
 There finds a nesting in a fetid bowl
 Hewn out by early cannonade of Krupp,
 To lie in state—albeit downside up!

Is Robilleux himself not scathed? Deplore,
 O heav'n, this fatal reckoning of gore!
 Deplore this noble blood; the aching void
 Terrestrial exposed when valour 's cloyed
 And brav'ry satiated! Scathed débris!
 The flagellant *fusée*² in ecstasy
 Explodes!—departs the principal machine,
 Disseminated gaseous like *chlorine*,
 And hurls its head upon the hero's chest
 To groove a wound from neck to shoulder-crest!

¹the Alsatians and Lorrainers played a prominent part in the defense
 of Verdun, being frequently arrayed against their brethren in the
 various campaigns

²shell-head

He sinks . . . he sighs . . . his eyes grow flutt'ring dim,
His throat contracts, a film of visions swim
In iridescence through the snowy tempest
New-risen, spangled, from the wintry west.
His hands reach out,—then clutch the injured spot,
His fingers ooze the vital crimson clot,
He smothers, and his head on breast deposits
In full renunciation of flown wits . . .

And thus the bearers find him hours past—
A slender body in the causeway cast
Of paved, high-littered dead. And Duchêny,
"The Snuffer" from the fertile Gascony,
Who worships on split knees. What dread despair
Is 'graven on the countenances there!
The *amoché*¹ is tenderly upborne
And to the *poste*² conveyed with manhood shorn
And every fibre shattered; where by grace
Of assiduity these harms efface
And warrior graduates afresh to brunt
The enemy at this illustrious front
Or that.

O Glory! welcome to thy corps
Returning Robilleux, who fought before
The Fortress of the East! He smacks of fame!
Must history and memory acclaim
Alone immortal those who toil intense
That martyrdom should be their recompense?

¹wounded soldier

²*poste de secours*, first-aid station

✧ VERDUN ✧

This hero spoke in fire! . . . pilgrimage
Embarked while France her darkest, drearest page
O'ertook. May living enter where dead woes
Are most inclined to flower and repose?
O say! . . . O designate for what recess
Is Robilleux proposed? What honour's dress
May him become? what high esteem? What fold
Of supermen, adventurous and bold,
Requires him? He may succumb at Aisne
Or Somme, or live to penetrate the vain,
Sarcastic soil across the borderland,
Where enemies shall venture hand in hand
Some morrow!—but whatever the employ
This soldier-prince of valour may enjoy,
Sing eulogies and barter for him roses,
O Highest, for in him indeed reposes
A heart of gold within a breast of steel!

At last has Prussia felt the sorry feel
Of French displeasure!—to her mole-hole gotten
In face of reinforcements; blood-besotten,
And reeking wet with sweat. Her brow contracts,
Her thoughts becloud; her vis-à-vis enacts,
She sees, the final panorama's play:
The Iron Corps relieved at fall of day—
March, 'tis—the 9th! And, subsequent, a band,
Sad-shrunk—the chief-lieutenant in command,—
Departing Verdun.....

CANTO VIII

VIII
ARGUMENT
"For Hell a Jest!"

(The Author questions the elation of the Second Mitrailleur Company over its victory.) Is the "Glory of the Battlefield" more potent a deduction than the meek and patient "Thou shalt not slay"?

VIII

Were they robust longer
 Or calm of soul or, in their triumph, stronger—
 These mitrailleurs? Exultant—boastful—proud?
 Had victory vainglorious them endowed?
 Or splendour of the war? Or subjugation
 Of toes—a fitting cause for jubilation!—
 Inducted colour to those waning cheeks?
 Prepared contentment for the coming weeks
 And months and years? It was not so betrayed:
 A sagging company, they made parade—
 For France a duty done. For hell a jest!
 For God a sacrifice. In them—a test!
 For Verdun, resurrection! And for slain—
 Only the knowledge of delight in pain! . . .

In such like, then, its parting sombre made
 The Second Mitrailleuse of the Seventy-Eighth Brigade!

CANTO IX

IX
ARGUMENT

"Return"

THE *poilu* Raoul Constant returns to the village of Charmes-sur-Moselle to address his attentions to Mariette, who has become the belle of another machine-gun company. A member of this company is Courcey, who is her acknowledged suitor. In an altercation between the rivals it develops that this company has been one of the cowardly units to retire from Verdun in the early débâcle. Whereupon Mariette, woman-like, scorns the less heroic fighter. She turns to Constant; but on his apprising her of the fate overtaking Paul Perclun and Pierre Raas, she withdraws from further intimacy among the *poilus*, preferring to indulge her tears in the memory of Perclun, whom she earlier disdained, but who now appears to her as the greatest hero of them all! A reminiscence is made of the balance of the company, and Raoul Constant, weary of the inconsistencies of peace, returns to war!

IX

In Charmes-sur-Moselle is another crew
Of gunners..... These be languishing for new
Morale, for fairer strength and heart and grace
Their early habitation to take place
Upon the fighting front.

Now comes a maid
But all too light of love and easy swayed
Upon this shoulder or that blue *capote*
Her head to re-deposit, as 'twere rote
Thus to bestrew affection.

On one day
A *poilu*—by the name Constant—that way
Is chanced to roam. He sees the lady fair—
Himself at once declares *permissionnaire*¹
And sues for favour.... 'Tis the strange event
That marches in this order: likewise bent
Upon a maudlin mission is Courcey—
A *chargeur* in the quartered company.

They reach an argument: “Çà—*mariolle!*”²
Declares the last belated,—“this were rôle
More fitting me than you! A village *môme*
Infatuates alone with *soldat* come
From Arras... Champagne.... Verdun!”

“Where were you?”
Intones the first disciple. “If 'twere true

¹soldier on furlough

²bluffer

At Verdun, I have only this to say:
For such a man I go, and yours the play!"

When thus defied a *poilu* can but trade
Upon his unit's number and brigade,
Upon the regimental record's page,
Which in this case was purely *camouflage*!
So ciphered Constant, and disclosed with scorn
The coward's part that had the unit borne
Among the ranks débâclé at Verdun—
For 'twas this very one so loathsome run
In opposite to they! Nor hesitated
To Mariette—she was it!—this belated
Treachery to show. Wherefore she paled,
Her bosom heaved, her ready language failed,
Her lustrous eyes grew moist, her clasped hands whitened,
Her supple hips beneath the corset tightened,
And sighs and tears coerced from him that story
Made less of Raas and more to Perclun's glory!
For had not Delmanhorst, his *copain*, seen,
With eyes accustomed to the battle's sheen,
The very deed! . . . the sacrificial cost
By which a life was gained! (another lost!)
Had not Perclun the shell-shock underborne
Heroic in the fight, and thus forsworn
His own existence?! Lasigny Ardette—
Was not he living and a shell-shock yet?
While Perclun lay, and Raas, and, from Savoy—
Gai; and the perished *caporal*, Du Roy,
In fragments on the field?!

Yet failed Raoul one
To casually remark, and him alone

Among their ranks, Lefèvre—he of heart
 So wide the strangling stress of war apart:
 The last begotten from his pit, whose chill
 Between the lines lay haunting with him still,
 Since had the stretcher-bearers near starvation
 The time allowed ere drawn him from his station
 By dead of night! . . .

It must be here recorded
 That Mariette the deepest grief afforded
 Her swelling breasts. For Pierre Raas not the most,
 But Perclun reaped a fairly gorgeous host
 Of solemn, salty tears.

Is violence blent
 With female virtue that the good intent
 Of lovers goes for naught, while bitter passions
 Become milady like the season's fashions? . . .

She worshipped and extolled the sacrifice
 Perceived to 've garnered Perclun's life in price,
 And cast abroad both lovers and desire
 The freer to be his memory to inspire!

"Thus," mourns Constant, "is woman ever ripe
 With tears of tragedy that none may wipe
 Save him who inconsistently cannot. . . .
 Alike is earth."

And having some way got
 A sadness in his soul, took *lance-pierre*
 And went again to slaughter. . . .

C'est la guerre!!

PART II
BALLADS OF FRANCE



For Marshal Foch

BALLADS OF FRANCE



TWENTIETH CORPS *D'ARMÉE*

HEROES of Verdun, saviours of France—

Twentieth Corps *d'Armée*;

Who fought in the vale of the Iron Lance?

The Twentieth Corps *d'Armée*!

Couronné de Nancy,—

Ypres and Arras and Somme;

Couronné de Nancy,—

The Iron Division is home!

O, hear the bugles blare,

O, hear the mad fanfare,

O, see the bourgeois stare,—

The Iron Division,

The Iron Division,

The Iron Division is home! . . .

They fought in Ypres, Arras, and they fought in Somme and
Aisne,

They fought before the Champagne and they're going there
again!

And Fritz will "*tomber sur son bec*"¹ and beg them to refrain

Who are sending in the Iron Division. . . .

O, hear the bugles, etc.

¹figuratively, stub his toe

Pétain—master strategist—pushed up into Verdun;
 The German *Berthas* paved the way with Creusot on the run,—
 O what a straggling army was retreating 'fore the "Hun"
 When France sent in the Iron Division. . . .
 O, hear the bugles, etc.

The Aisne—the Aisne—the bloody Aisne!—the Aisne of liquid
 fire!
 The Ladies' Road, a hornèd toad, lay panting in the mire!
 Come, succour, come!—we *claboté!*¹ And Fritz is 'gainst
 the wire! . . .
 So help us—the Iron Division!—
 O, hear the bugles, etc.

So hurry back from Ypres and so hurry into France,
 And hurry to Neuville St. Vaast, the Teuton hordes advance!
 For Tommy is in Belgium and he'll show them how to
 dance!—
 Forward the Iron Division. . . .
 O, hear the bugles, etc.

They caught a mess of *boches* in the Labyrinth. A blur
 Was all they left of Germany upon that *champ d'honneur!*
 But oh, the Fifth *Huzzards*²—the gallant Fifth! . . . What
 blood must stir
 In Nancy for the Iron Division! . . .
 O, hear the bugles, etc.

¹the *poilu's* slang for die

²the Fifth Hussars of Nancy, almost decimated in the first French offensive
 in the Champagne. . . . attached to the Iron Division

And so they're back again in state from Arras and from Ypres,
The Champagne, Verdun, Somme and Aisne, still standing off
the Reaper,

And may Almighty God look down on Nancy's Corps and
keep her—

The Iron Division of France! . . .

O, hear the bugles blare,

O, hear the mad fanfare,

O, see the bourgeois stare,—

The Iron Division,

The Iron Division,

The Iron Division is home! . . .

THE LONG LINE THINS

WE were two hundred and forty-eight men
 Walking into Ypres, walking into Ypres;
 Poperinghe, Vlamertynge, Zonnebeke, and then
 Walking out of Ypres, walking out of Ypres.
 I said to Velvelong: "How many are there left
 Coming into Arras' *bois*?"
 He said: "Two-twenty, but for Mauser bullets plenty,
 And the long line thins, François;
 The long line thins,
 The long line thins,
 And the worst side wins, François!" . . .

We were two hundred and twenty odd men
 Walking into Arras, walking into Arras;
 Mont St. Eloi, Ecoivres, and then
 Walking out of Arras, walking out of Arras.
 I said to Velvelong: "How many are there left?"
 He counted: "*Un, deux, trois,—*
 One hundred-nine, but the slaughter has been fine,
 And the long line thins, François;
 The long line thins,
 The long line thins,
 And the battle dins, François!" . . .

We were one hundred and nine sick men
 Going to the clay, going to the clay;
 Vitry-la-Ville, *Borne Seize*, and then
 We left the Champagne (some were there to stay!).

I said to Velvelong: "How many are there left—

Perclun and Raas and Ary Blas?"

"Eighty!" he said, (he meant the rest were dead!)

"And the long line thins, François;

The long line thins,

The long line thins,

And the death's-head grins, François!" . . .

We were then eighty dog-tired men

Limping into Verdun, limping into Verdun;

Froide Terre, *Vallée de la Mort*, and then

Limping out of Verdun, every breath a burden!

I said to Velvelong: "How many are there left?—

Verdun est sauvé—halte-là!"

"Sixty," answered he, "but the shell-shock gathered three,

And the long line thins, François;

The long line thins,

The long line thins,

He must end who begins, François!" . . .

We were still sixty worn, white men

Marching in the Somme, marching in the Somme;

Maricourt, Hardecourt, Combles, and then

Forty hustled home, nevermore to roam!

I said to Velvelong: "How many are there left?"

(Thinking of the din at Maurepas)

"Twenty," muttered he, "of our Belgian company,

And the long line thins, François;

The long line thins,

The long line thins,

Life and death are twins, François!" . . .

Thus we were twenty sad, solemn men
 Ordered to the Aisne, ordered to entrain—
 Villers-le-Nancy, Graonne, and then
Chemin des Dames—slaughtering again!
 I said to Velvelong: "Is anybody left?"—
 (Thinking of the splendour of the fight)
 "You, *Americain*, every other man is slain,"
 Said his dead-man's lips bled white:
 "The long line 's done,
 The old Eighth 's gone,
 And you're all alone to-night!" . . .

SUIVEZ-MOI!¹

ENTRE *les lignes*² not a sound could be heard
 But the sibilant sough of the clover;
 "Papa" Niclausse gave a sign and the word,
 And the Eighth at his back went over!—

Over the parapet,—
 Ça, they are going yet,
 Stirring the bees, dew-wet,
 Out of the clover. . . .
 Upward the *marmites* ching,
 Downward the *you-yous* fling,
 Forward the *poilus* swing
 Into the clover. . . .

"Papa" Niclausse has a flash in his eye
 And he says: "*Suivez-moi!*" in the clover;
 "Papa" Niclausse has a ball in his thigh,
 But the Eighth at his back goes over!—

Over the parapet,
Dieu! they are hard beset,
 Down into La Villette
 Fertile with clover;
 "*Suivez-moi!*" hear them sing—
 Souls that are taking wing
 Hard on the battle's ring,
 Dying in clover. . . .

¹"Follow me!" ²between the lines, the French "No-man's Land"

“Papa” Niclausse has arrived at the *poste*
And they’re dressing his thigh under cover;
“Papa” Niclausse wears a face like a ghost
While the Eighth ’s going on in the clover!—

They have a sanguine debt
At the foe’s parapet;
“*Suivez-moi!*” Farther yet—
Up there and over!
Hand to hand battling,
*Rosalies*¹ rattling,
Vict’ry is bound to bring
Out of the clover! . . .

¹the *poilu*’s name for his bayonet

THE BIRDS WERE SINGING

I KNOW a place in Picardy
 Where the *bois* is rich with laughter,
 With dead men's bones and live men's groans
 And bird-sounds that come after!
 The dead men lie just as dead men should
 With their souls at the Saviour's knee;
 And the live men cry and let go and die
 While the birds sing at La Folie. . . .

O, the birds,
 O, the birds,
 Singing in the Bois de La Folie—
 Cannons crow,
 Bugles blow,
 But the birds sing on and never know;
 O, the birds, singing birds,—
 The voices of the Bois de La Folie;
 Folly ventures—hate retorts,
 Wisdom censures,—death cavorts!
 God is bleeding on the plains of
 Picardy. . . .

Loud is the cannon's bray,
 Louder than loud the slaughter,
 But rippling high'r like an angels' choir
 Is the rustle of rippling water;—
 Or is it the trill of the whippoorwill?
 Or is it the song of the Free?
 Or is it the Host of the Holy Ghost
 Dwelling in the Bois de La Folie? . . .

Nay—the birds,
Twitt'ring birds,
 Singing in the *bois* their symphony—
Friend or foe,
Warriors go,
But the birds sing on and never know;
O, the birds, guileless birds,
 Flutt'ring through the Bois de La Folie;—
Men are scarred, and, dying, cry!
God! it 's hard for men to die
 On the bleeding, draining plains of
 Picardy! . . .

DEPARTURE FROM BELGIUM

(For the Tomb of the Unknown Poilu)

THEY'RE sending the Madeleine¹ busses to Ypres,
 For Britain is lending the Tommies to keep her,
 And all the young *poilus* are laughing down deeper—
 They're going back home to the Somme;
 Home, home, going home
 To the Aisne or the Somme,
 And it doesn't much matter
 For soldiers must roam!
 And they'll die like they must die
 And never a shout—
 But it must be for France
 That the *poilu* goes out!
 And it must be in France
 He goes out. . . .

Çà!—too long in Belgium have battles been waged,
 And too long have Frenchmen the foeman engaged
 On soil that is foreign,—a battle 's best staged
 By a *poilu* at home in the Somme!
 Home, best staged at home
 In the Champagne or Somme,
 And it doesn't much matter
 For soldiers must roam!
 Nor it doesn't much matter
 When death comes about—

¹the Paris busses formerly operating between the Church of the Madeleine and the site of the old Bastille were transferred to Belgium for carrier-service during the war; the sign "MADELEINE-BASTILLE" was still prominently displayed to the delight of the *poilus*

But it must be for France
That the *poilu* goes out!
Yes, it must be in France
He goes out. . . .

Down the road they are swinging,—it passes belief
That the sector, by Hector, is getting relief! . . .
And there's many a heart in St. Jean wrung with grief
For a *poilu* gone home to the Somme!
For a *poilu* gone home
To Lorraine or the Somme,
And it doesn't much matter
For soldiers must roam!
And it isn't in nature
To kiss and to flout,
But it must be for France
That the *poilu* goes out!
And it must be in France
He goes out. . . .

Then he throws up his *kepi*¹ to stifle regret,
And he shrugs and huzzahs though his eyes may be wet,
For 'twas Belgium that put half of France in her debt
When she offered Liège for the Somme!
Going home—going home—
To the Vosges or the Somme;
O, it doesn't much matter
For soldiers must roam!
But Flanders it was
Handed Prussia a rout

¹cap

❧ BALLADS OF FRANCE ❧

When she battled for France
Ere the *poilus* went out!
Ere the *poilus* in France
Mustered out. . . .

So the vet'ran he mounts for the *Grands Boulevards*,
And he 's glad to leave Belgium though quitting is hard;
And God willing, he 's off; but God knows how he 's jarred
In the Madeleine busses for home!
Home, home, going home
To some front—maybe Somme;
And it doesn't much matter
For soldiers must roam!
And he'll die as he must die
For *patrie*, no doubt,—
And for hearth and for home
And for France he'll go out!
For it must be in France
He goes out. . . .

THE FIFTH HUSSARS

OVER the tangle of wires,
Over the shell-shot holes,
The Fifth Hussars of Nancy
Are riding like h— over souls!
Some of them fall but none of them stall,
Going to heaven and victory—all!
God cannot gather a nobler haul
Than the Fifth Hussars—Hussars! . . .

The Fifth Hussars of Nancy,
The Fifth Hussars of Nancy,
They rode to the front at Beauséjour
And they're going yet, I fancy!
Going yet, going yet,
With their steeds a crimson gore;
Going yet, going yet,
And they'll never come back any more!

Under the tremour of starshine,
Under the weird moonlight,
The Fifth Hussars of Nancy
Lie broken and bleeding to-night!
What though they lay, slayers must slay,
War has no mercy and God wants no clay,—
Over the clouds to the dawn away
Ride the Fifth Hussars—Hussars! . . .

The Fifth Hussars of Nancy,
The Fifth Hussars of Nancy,
 They rode to the front at Beauséjour
And they're going yet, I fancy!
 Going yet, going yet,
 With their steeds a crimson gore;
 Going yet, going yet,
 And they'll never come back any more!

LE PARALLÈLE DE DÉPART¹

THE *génies* tunnel 'neath the wire,
 They're opening up the pit—
 The pit that 's full of flare and fire,
 We're out adigging it!
 The picks ring out, the shovels shout:
 "En avant!"² En avant! En avant!"
 They'd like to put the spades to rout
 But they can't—they can't—they can't! . . .
 For we're digging, digging, digging, digging down
 the *parallèle*,
 We're digging, digging, digging, and it 's hotter here
 than hell!
 And not a single word from us nor crack of a Lebel,³
 For we're digging, digging, digging in the clover. . . .

We dig and think, and the night grows drunk
 With a smothering, smoky smell—
 It 's the penalty of the souls that shrunk
 From digging the *parallèle*;
 Digging and dying and dropping there
 Like leaves in the shiv'ring night;
 It 's hard to stand when the *fusées*⁴ flare,
 It 's harder than hard to fight

¹departing parallel, i. e., trench dug before the first line in the van of an offensive; standing thus "between the lines" the diggers are exposed to the greatest danger; the attacking regiment rises from the parallel, thus lessening the distance to the enemy's works

²"Forward!"

³French rifle system

⁴when a *fusée* flares it is a rocket—*fusée éclairante*

When you're digging, digging, digging, digging down
the *parallèle*,
Digging, digging, digging, how?—the first attack
will tell!—
And it may be Fritz's fun'ral but it won't be France's knell
That we're digging, digging, digging in the clover. . . .

Night goes out and the dawn comes in
And with it the weak, worn crew;
And how we stagger in is sin,
But the *parallèle* is through!—
Fit for the fighters! Day breaks green
With the blare of a bursting foam! . . .
And hard on this, in the battle's sheen,
The sob of a soul gone home,
Who was digging, digging, digging, digging down
the *parallèle*,
Digging, digging, digging,—just a life too cheap to sell!—
So they'll take his *plaque d'identité*¹ and sink him
where he fell
While we're digging, digging, digging in the
clover. . . .

The regiment 's in first attack
And starts by middle noon,—
And some pass on while the rest come back
And it 's night again so soon!
Then "Hear my sob!" says the soul in hell
And the Lord in His mercy stoops
And gathers up from the *parallèle*
The first-line last-time troops!—

¹identification-tag, attached to neck and wrist of each soldier; removed at death

So we're digging, digging, digging, but it 's not a
parallèle!

Digging, digging, digging, and no *boches* here to shell,
For it 's graves we're digging, brother, don't you see
each narrow cell

That we're digging, digging, digging in the clover? . . .

THE GUITOUNE (CACHIBI OR ABRI)¹

CLAY underneath and the sky spreading over,
Clover behind and in front of it clover,
A not-very-sure but a God-given cover—

The *guitoune* (*cachibi* or *abri*) . . .

The *guitoune* (*cachibi* or *abri*), my brother—

A heaven, a haven, a home without mother!

A heaven in hell till the gas makes you smother

In the *guitoune* (*cachibi*)

The *guitoune* (or *abri*)

The *guitoune* (*cachibi* or *abri*)!

The *marmites* fret by through the sibilant sky,
Ching-ching-a-ling-ing, and never too high,—
For it 's hard to exist but it 's easy to die

In the *guitoune* (*cachibi* or *abri*)! . . .

The *guitoune*, etc.

Then one of you sleeps while the other 's on watch,
Eye to the *créneau*²—or trying as such!—
For the mud at the bottom 's like sud to the touch

In the *guitoune* (*cachibi* or *abri*) . . .

The *guitoune*, etc.

The *capitaine* says: "Dig a new *parallèle*!"

The *caporal* growls in his throat: "Go to h——!"

But the company starts like a snail in its shell

From the *guitoune* (*cachibi* or *abri*);

The *guitoune*, etc.

¹three names the *poilu* uses to denote his trench residence,—dugout

²shooting-hole in the parapet

And shoulders the picks and goes under the wire
 And digs a new trench with the night kissing fire!
 And crawls back at dawn (but it 's not there entire!)
 To the *guitoune* (*cachibi* or *abri*);
 The *guitoune*, etc.

And lays there in straw till the *frichti*¹ comes in—
*Ragoût de bœuf*² and *punaises*³ and *vin*,
 Hotter than shot when it 's colder than sin
 In the *guitoune* (*cachibi* or *abri*). . . .
 The *guitoune* (*cachibi* or *abri*), my brother—
 A heaven, a haven,—to h—— with the other!—
 The *guitoune* (*cachi—bi——*)
 The *guitoune* (or *ab—ri——*)
 The *gui—toune—*(*cachi—bi—or—ab—zzz!*). .

¹food

²beef-stew

³literally "bed-bugs," *poilu* slang for lentils, a small flat army bean comprising most of the daily ration

THE CAPORAL OF THE ESCOUADE¹

THE *caporal* of the *escouade*—

He is shell shock-shock-shock-shocked,
His eyeballs twitched like a thing bewitched
As the trench rock-rock-rock-rocked.
With his Lebel cocked in his hand, my lad,
With his Lebel cock-cock-cocked,—
His eyeballs twitched like a thing bewitched
As the trench rock-rock-rock-rocked! . . .

The *caporal* is a youngish one
With his gold hair gray-gray-gray,
For his hedging mind and his muscles pined
As they learned to sway-sway-sway.
As they heard the *Berthas* bray, my lad,
As they heard the *Berthas* bray,—
His hedging mind and his muscles pined
For they learned to sway-sway-sway. . . .

The cannonade on the second day
Filled the air with a sound-sound-sound
That was most akin to the hellish din
Where the souls of men are ground;—
Where the souls of men are bound, my lad,
Where the souls of men are found;
It was most akin to the hellish din
Where the souls of men are ground;—

And clutched his throat with a threat-threat-threat
Like scorching, torturing thews. . . .

¹pronounced *ess-coo-ahd*; command of a corporal, usually 15 men

O it's sad-sad-sad to be going mad
 When the first offensive brews!
 With the first offensive news, my lad,
 With the first offensive news,—
 It 's sad-sad-sad to be going mad
 When the first offensive brews! . . .

"For-for-forward!" the captain said,
 And the line-line-line waked up
 From its drunken calm (wine is slaughter-balm!)
 To head for the mouth of Krupp! . . .
 With lips that spoke a psalm, my lad,
 With lips that breathed a psalm,—
 Awoke from its calm—its drunken balm
 To head for the mouth of Krupp! . . .

"Par-parapet, must you twitch-twitch-twitch?"
 Said the small blue form-form-form
 On the crest of a mine in the *boche* first-line
 As he waited there for the storm.
 A squirming form like a worm, my lad,
 A brave young form—but a worm!—
 On the crest of a mine in the *boche* first-line
 He waited there for the storm. . . .

It came-came-came, and it hurled him up,—
 But death was a mock-mock-mock:
 Too low to die, and yet—*Dieu*, too high!—
 He crumpled a shock-shock-shock!
 Into the trench as it rocked, my lad,—
 The trench as it rock-rock-rocked,
 Too low to die, and yet—*Dieu*, too high! . . .
 He crumpled a shock-shock-shock!

The *caporal* of the *escouade*—

They are naming him for a “Cross,”

And it isn't the bounce of his spine that counts

But because he survived the toss!—

Though it may be a loss that he lives, my lad,

Though it may be a loss-loss-loss,

It isn't the bounce of his spine that counts

But because he survived the toss! . . .

THE FIVE AT ARMAGEDD'N¹

THE battle rolls,
 The battle rolls,
 The batt'ries break and tremble!
 The red night shrieks,
 The pale moon streaks,
 The armies—twain—assemble!
 The lines divide,
 The plains belch wide
 Their husks of steel exploding!
 The dust-clouds rise,
 The victim dies,
 His foe exultant goading! . . .

¹On a tour of northern France in 1918, directly after the cessation of hostilities, the Author was impelled to compose the lines of THE FIVE AT ARMAGEDD'N owing to the valour of a certain family of Durachêne. Inquiry elicited the information that father and sons—the *payson* Enoch and his four lusty offspring—attacked the enemy with such vindictiveness that two hundred or more *boches* fell to their "bag." It was then discovered that the grudge was as deep-planted, in fact, as '70, when, during the Franco-Prussian War, the mother of Enoch, having come of *accouchement* through the rapine of a German officer, besought her son to avenge the wrong already in his nonage. Owing to the march of events this was not practicable until the World War. A growing family of his own now enabled the conceived one to marshal four sons as deeply imbued with *boche*-hatred as he. Fanatics they rode to the front, and the large accounting in enemy mortality can but press home the lesson that this one wrong so fluently illustrates:—The seed of the invader, forcibly deposited upon alien soil, develops not a coadjutor but is tenfold multiplied to smite against his fundamentals! . . .

Ho, Armagedd'n—'gedd'n!
How your fields commence to redd'n!
 How with pain is drawn the mask of dawn
And all the blood is shedd'n!
The blood is shedd'n red, O Lord!—
 And green the turf displaces;
For Five at Armagedd'n ride
 With vengeance in their faces!

They ride—five men—
The demon's den
 Of horror and of clamour
Far, far without! . . .
'Twere vain to scout
 The negligence of glamour! . . .
They kill to kill,
Let nothing still
 The heart behind the rifle,
But what 's before—
Ah God, by score
 The dizzy breath must stifle!

Ho, Armagedd'n—'gedd'n!
All your breast is cratered lead'n!
 The moon is white this sanguine night
For 'passioned ways are tread'n!
The ways of hell are dark, O Lord,
 And stark with battle traces,—
For Five at Armagedd'n ride
 With vengeance in their faces! . . .

The first attack
 In offal black
 Its liquid fire looses;
 The raiders pass,
 Fall back with gas
 And shrapnel bursts and bruises!
 A chaos reigns,
 Life's ebbing drains
 Bleed now, ah ghastly solemn!—
 But pledged to debt
 The fierce quintette
 O'erruns its fainting column

At Armagedd'n—'gedd'n!
 Now are hoof-beats fast embedd'n
 In mangled corses—Prussia's forces
 Crashed and slashed ere fledd'n! . . .
 The stench of trench is warm, O Lord;—
 The fetid horde embraces. . . .
 For Five at Armagedd'n ride
 With vengeance in their faces!

The battle rolls,
 The battle rolls,
 The din 's at last protesting
 Such sable sloth,
 Such wanton wroth,
 Such all too sombre jesting! . . .
 Behind each shot
 'S a bitter rot—

Behind each rank 's another,
For who can tide
The raven-ride
That brother 's pledged to brother?—

The Five at Armagedd'n!
To vow and vengeance wedd'n,
When hour 's ripe then blood must wipe
This curse from Armagedd'n!
The thread of life is slim, O Lord,
And few the given paces,—
For Five at Armagedd'n ride
With vengeance in their faces! . . .

The last attack
By dawn is back
And half are unaccounted!
The *capitaine*
His pinioned brain
Some bayonet has mounted! . . .
The line recedes,
The dank sod bleeds,
A splatter of spent lead
Alone 's alive,
Except the Five
Who mingle with the dead—

Their dead at Armagedd'n!—
From whom the life is shredd'n
That oath may live and death forgive
A sin at Armagedd'n!

For ways of war are strange, O Lord,
And peace at last erases
The Five at Armagedd'n's wrath
With vengeance from their faces! . . .

L'Envoi

With vengeance—aye,
And roiling cry,
That strikes before—behind them. . . .
Doom written terse—
A muttered curse,
And death remains to mind them
Alone! . . . O steeds,
You shrink from deeds
That men call well-contested—
Is battle's bout
And fearful rout
By mercy e'er arrested? . . .

Not so at Armagedd'n,
Where fields are shameful bledd'n
That some poor heart must always smart
And some poor soul must dead'n,—
Some woman sob her sob, O Lord,
In given time and spaces,
That Hosts at Armagedd'n ride
With vengeance in their faces! . . .

PART THREE
AS GOD IN FRANCE



For General de Castelnau

AS GOD IN FRANCE¹



I STRODE into a village quiet
Where ruin seemed the only diet

And questioned of the habitants some key to Beauville's fate.
"The Château Beauville?" answered some,
"On that score are we likewise dumb,
It does not do, *m'sieu*', to plumb
The truth of that estate."

"Now, come," I cried, myself beside,
And hoping by this means to chide
Their singular reserve and lack of welcome or advance;
"If Teuton vandals are to blame,
What ever of the count became—
The Count Le Beau—the very same
Who lived as god in France? . . ."

¹literally, *Wie Gott in Frankreich*,—an expression in Germany prior to the World War; when a member of the wealthy class acquired an estate in France it was generally for the purpose of enjoying a rich life since eastern France was synonymous in the Prussian mind with fertility; hence "He lives as a god in France" is proverbially applied where German middle-class as well as noble families have an extravagant *ménage*

"*Wie geht es Ihrem Cousin?*" ("How is your cousin?")

"*Der lebt wie Gott in Frankreich!*" ("He lives like a god in France!")

The habitants themselves among
 Their hands in indecision wrung,
 Then ventured to remark that since so pressing my regard,
 Perhaps the Count Le Beau were friend,
 And if so-seemed 'twere best to mend
 Such amity as might portend
 To cause myself discard.

"How?!" Then cried I to this decry,
 Not wishing to depict the spy:
 "The count has merrie friends, I'm told, and manner pleasant
 But shades of horror overcast [seeming."
 Their features as betrayed the last
 Some echo of his clouded past
 Which I, alas, esteeming,

But all too clearly misconceived.
 "Now can it be indeed believed
 That this presumptuous monster were the model of all grace?
 And that the world confers its praise
 Upon the error of his ways?"
 They asked in much the same amaze
 As mirrored on my face! . . .

"The world believes (as I believed),
 And doubtless we were both deceived,
 That Count Le Beau, a scion of the richest Teuton line,
 Himself preferred in France the season
 For climate or some other reason
 To pass, though were it due to treason
 Is no concern of mine!"

To these warm words the villagers
 In chorus cried: "Yon tomb inters
 (Referring to the ruins of the Castle of Beauville)
 The darkest villain of an age
 Whose hist'ry is become the page
 Most given o'er to grief and rage
 Of any now until!"

And forthwith to a *bistro*¹ led
 Where was (with one accord they said)
 A publican whose knowledge of the Count Le Beau exceeded
 So far their own, that were it not
 For war's conditions, on the spot
 Some mad fanatic had him shot
 Nor plea nor pray'r heeded!

This bitterness 'twas hard to guess
 Should by these rustics be possess'.
 I sought the public landlord and I found him *Rhein geboren*.
 "Gewiss, aus Hessen!" To my fright
 He answered in a tone polite,
 Nor seemed the least perplexed his plight
 Had *Vaterland verloren*.

So then with numerous flagons filled,
 And much persuasion like distilled,
 I finally loosed a fountain in his tongue so arch-efficient,
 That had the night not hours to pass
 And day as well its dawn to mass,
 We should be passing word and glass
 Until the tomb omniscient!

¹public drinking-house

“My life,” began the publican,—
 “In Prussia, speaking man to man,
 A hellish sort of mem’ry dates from where this tale begins.
 It happened on a Sabbath morn—
 My son—a youth, but early born
 In nineteen-three, and church besworn
 From folly and from sins—

“(A purer boy there never raised)
 Came home to me unduly praised,
 He said, by *Herr* von Lebau, of the steel munition plants. . .
 The *Herr Baron* his residence—
 A large estate and wooded dense—
 Has bounded that the picket-fence
 My lodge a shelter grants.

“Now frequently, with my consent,
 The boy his footsteps thither bent
 Ostensibly for service in the castle, grounds, or flow’rs,
 So that in time his visits grew
 More often there, with us more few,
 And in the end he seldom knew
 Our home by day or hours.

“Yet nights alone were always ours! . . .
 When Château Lebau’s gloomy tow’rs
 Stretched out in silhouette against the sunset’s bloody blot,
 His virile stride my son’s return
 At once announced; for mothers’ yearn
 Is keen and oft their ears discern
 What you and I cannot.

“ ’Twas whispered in the neighbourhood—
And long before I understood—

That practices indecorous and lewd beyond a doubt
Were holding forth in that abode
So latterly with death bestrode
(The *Frau Baronin*’s cortège rode
The handsome driveway out

“But half a year or so before).

I stood within my dwelling-door

Determined to forbid my son the castle’s threshold longer;
I waited for his lithe young form,
In anxious reverie a storm
Perceiving, and in some alarm
From that and scandal-monger. . . .

“The night came on, the day came on;

My son had neither come nor gone.

I laid it to the tempest and was not unduly frightened.
All through the day the rain in sheets
And heavy hail and foggy sleets
And wind, that ’bout the shutters beats,
Assailed us—thundered—lightened!

“We saw the drizzling ooze of day

Go out again,—the dull night lay

Decrepit like a withered oak with tears of torment teeming;
And fresh dawn blew with breath anew,
Sweet-flavoured; like a bride it drew
Its veil of opal, pink with dew,
Across the meadows, streaming.

“A meagre form lay someway couched
 Across our threshold, lightly touched
 With fingers of the morning in his hair and on his brow! . .
 With twisted lips that seemed to moan. . . .
 With twisted soul,—ah God, my groan
 Sped out like dirige’s intone
 To heav’n and saints enow!

“He lived to us a week. It seemed
 My son was done by that arch-fiend—
 The *Herr Baron* von Lebau, in his den of sodomy!
 You understand, *m’sieu*’, he died.
 And after him my wife, who cried
 With every breath till death denied:
 ‘Revenge this infamy!’

“And this, indeed, I strove to do.
 I drew my dwelling-door a-to,
 Determined for the castle to exterminate such viper! . . .
 But destiny—or was it guilt?!—
 Betook him, ere the blood was spilt,
 To Potsdam, there to come in tilt
 With one whose plans were riper—

“His royal master! To be brief,
M’sieu’, my vengeance came to grief:
 Report had spread and painted him the libertine astounding
 That all the world was soon to hate!
 And then at some convenient date
 They buried him with regal state
 And pomp and trumpet sounding!

“To hide he died! . . . You see it?—lied
To drive the rumours back! I spied

 Upon the cemetery where they sank him, orthodox. . . .
And then at night I raised the soil
With endless secrecy and toil
And saw—my senses in turmoil!—

It was an empty box!

“Now back to Potsdam, back to Hessen—
My vigilance did no way lessen:

 I followed him to Berlin and to Alsace and to France;
Saw Château Beauville rise. Of course
The funds, you know their royal source,
As well the plan,—a different horse
 You see it at a glance,

“Than most châteaux. What further rose
Was unbeknown in fact to those

 Authorities in Paris at the *Bureau de la Place*
Where military secrets bide—
Until I happened to divide
What knowledge I had early pried
 By dint of *thaler's* grace

“The lone servitor's lips therefrom;
He was of dumbest men most dumb!

 Well, now the war is over, I am willing to admit
The government in Paris seized
What information I was pleased
To offer it, and further eased
 My stay in France a bit.”

He leaned—the publican—across
 My table with his bulk as gross
 As most of those barbarians that debouch across the Rhine,
 And in his guttural voice avowed
 That therefore was he thus allowed
 To live as god in France, and proud
 To offer me more wine!

We drank. We sank—I equal lank
 In contrast to his bulk, and blank
 To every other sight or sound save what my host presented—
 Into the tavern chairs. “Perceive,
M’sieu,” he said, “how like a sieve
 The information up my sleeve
 I gave to France, contented! . . .

“And when the war was on the border—
 Strife supplanting law and order—
 How, think you, sent Prussia all her legions and munitions
 At this congested point to France
 To join the emperor’s devils’ dance
 With honour and good countenance
 To glut her vain ambitions?”

Sarcasm floated on his tone.
 “Through yonder Castle Beauville, blown
 To atoms with the host inside—*Herr Lebau*, Count Le Beau!”
 He chuckled, and his voice grew thick—
 “*Dank Gott*, I helped them turn the trick,
 And did we do it thorough—quick?
 Behold the late château!”

He rose and made a mock salute
Where lay the ruin, stark and mute.

“Go down, *m'sieu*’, and see it when the day discerns its rot.”

And thus appeased in some respect,

I asked him if the public recked

In Germany the true aspect

Of *Herr* Lebau or not.

To this he could in nowise grant

An answer. Whereupon the slant

Of early dawn betrayed the fact that day was fast ap-
“Be off to bed,” advised my host, [proaching.

And drank with solemn glee a toast

Of torture to Le Beauville’s ghost,

No more his peace encroaching. . . .

We creaked the ancient stairway up

Upon this last and vengeful cup,

And finally in a chamber-room he left me to my slumber.

And out of mind and out of sight

I put Le Beauville for the night,

Nor noticed that the night was bright

With cannons in great number!

They quivered and they shivered and

A sibilance on either hand

Awoke the scent of powder-smoke and charred my nostrils

A tangy, indiscriminate smell [fleetly—

That shattered with a bursting shell

To resurrect but far too well

And clutch my throat discreetly! . . .

And right and left our lines bereft
 As this or that young *poilu* cleft
 In twain by vast concussion and destroying matter dense!
 A rocket flared!—the white night shrank!
 The bloody battle drank and drank!
 And yet was ever at my flank
 Inferno more intense!

I felt its heat—its liberal fire!
 Its twinge of hate—its foeman's ire!
 The *commandant* recoiled with half his body in a trench!
 And all at once the heavens reeled,
 And slaughter choked the rocking field
 So red with gore, with hearts so steeled
 Yet fresh moved by the wrench

Of horror that succeeds attack,
 That all the world seemed strangely black
 For me in that foul midnight and that further foul morass!
 And when I raised my head again,
 The captain stood convulsed with pain
 Yet in his eyes a hope not vain,
 And signalled me to pass,—

“Go out,” he said, “and take your men
 To yonder traitor-demon's den. . . .
 (He meant by this a castle on the borders of the village)
 Make 'way with him you find inside,
 And in the darkness there abide,
 But let no soldier override
 My order and do pillage!”

Thus meagrely equipped I trod
My soldier-unit, led by God,—

No doubt of that, since shrapnel sprayed a wild tattoo
And rapid-fire engines smote [around us,
The *patte-epaule*¹ from my *capote*,
And shrill and shrewd the raucous note
Of baneful battle bound us!—

Forth in the night on murder bent! . . .
Deep in our hearts was strange content

Withal that ours the *escouade* assigned this special mission.
We passed the village, passed the tiles
Of broken houses war defiles
In many jumbled modes and styles
To gain a fair position

From whence a sortie might be made
And homage to the inmate paid
By way of rifle or grenade depending on his spirit.
Then swept the outlines to our view
As nearer, ever nearer drew
My stout *corvée*,² concerned anew
To hasten and to clear it!

We passed the shadowed garden dreaming
'Neath the cannons' ardent screaming,
'Neath the flare-shells and the red demise of battle's lust;
'Neath a single light reflecting
In the pond as if objecting
To the god-of-war's dissecting,
Which men label just!—

¹padded gun-rest on shoulder of coat ²squad on special service

And Ary Blas the first discerned
Where high above the glitter burned
 That lit us so unconscious to its harbour and its hearth.
Then up we leapt the marbled stair,
An entrance made all unaware,
And through the portal, past the rare
 Interior of a worth

Too lavish—costly! Groping mostly
'Mid the furnishings grown ghostly
 Scattered through the premises, we reached the inner flight;
Mounted, and together banding
Mounted still another landing,
Where, with open door, was standing
 Saw we to our right

A gleaming chamber! Naught inside it—
Once our bayonets had tried it—
 But the sodden odour from a corpse upon the bed! . . .
Duty-bound, with one accord
This spoiled carrion we explored,
Marvelling that death had scored
 Ere thither we were led;

Then saw it was a serving-man
Of ancient years, whose meted span
 Was even so cut short by energetic, wayward splinter
From shattered shot against the roof—
A sanguinary war reproof
That not one habitat aloof
 Should overstay the winter! . . .

And then a roaming of the place
 We made at fairly rapid pace
 Through dim, cadav'rous corridors and further rooms un-
 With splendour and luxuriance [folding
 Most aptly styled "as god in France."
 The *corvée's* common countenance
 Was dazzled at beholding!

We stood at last again before
 The chamber on the topmost floor,
 Where swung the door the threshold o'er with most re-
 Twelve rifles simultaneous raised! [sounding thwack!
 Twelve rifles simultaneous blazed!
 Upon the platform, reeling dazed,
 We saw the door give back

Before the valour of our arms! . . .
 And terrified by these alarms
 Saw also in the brilliance of the chamber first explored,
 Where serving-man in death lay couched
 And otherwise no thing was touched,
 A smallish gentleman debouched—
 The castle's very lord!

Faded cheeked and crouching, grumbling,
 Haunting in his look and humbling,
 There we came upon him, certain that his doom was writ! . . .
 A dodd'ring wretch, he typified
 The sort of soul that dies denied
 Of every inch of soldier pride,
 Forsworn and knowing it!

Now mark! This count was noble named!
As lineal descent stood shamed

Our squad whom peasant ancestry had sent to make his
And caught a wand'ring word or two [doom;
The old man spoke, that we might view
The echo of his shrunk issue
Long faded in the tomb.

Said I: "How comes it, Count Le Beau,
You 'habit here where cannons grow
About your very threshold sights and scenes alike distress-
Your purse is energetic, so [ing?
They 've given us advice below,
Then why should man surround with woe
Whose wants are scarcely pressing?"

He eyed with eyes of grave mistrust
The blue-clad forms so gray with dust
From Soissons' ashy atmosphere and Rheims' succumbing
Then wrung his withered hands whose veins [tow'rs;
In bluish whipcords showed the strains
Of no hard work, but rather drains
From youth's departed pow'rs,

And licked his lips—those lips acrackle,
Fanged beneath like hungry jackal—
Dreading to expose his life, more anxious to enclose it.
"As god in France!" was all he said,
And pressed against the antique bed
Now sworn to service for the dead
Since sole retainer chose it!

A subtle aromatic flavour
 Commenced before our sight to waver,
 Intangible,—and then and there our boasted valour ban-
 We clutched and strained, immensely pained, [ished! . . .
 But bed and dead retainer waned;
 And when our senses we regained
 The Count Le Beau had vanished!

“Great God!” I cried, and forward hurling
 Through the subtle twilight’s swirling,
 Cast into a passage and against a dizzy stoop!—
 The mould’ring damp of fresh concrete
 With not too many years replete
 Nor sight nor sound, but slippered feet
 Smote in upon the troop. . . .

They groped and followed. Dank and hollowed,
 The morbid grave our presence swallowed
 As were we subterranean souls on hellishness embarked.
 And through a mildewed corridor
 And down a flight—then followed more—
 And always slippered feet before
 That scrambled as they larked.

“Now, then,” thought I, “this dizzy vault
 Must surely come in time to halt,”
 And heard my thoughts re-echo through the solemn track’s
 Nor saw beyond the Stygian gloom [expanse;
 A longish, thinnish finger loom
 That seemed to point and say: “Your doom
 You’ll meet as god in France!”

We clambered on—we cluttered on,
 And bats advanced and fluttered on,
 In desolation beating out their wings against the ceiling;
 And up the stair and down the stair
 And through a barred and stagnant lair
 That led into a passage bare
 Again we ventured, reeling. . . .

As god in France! As god in France!
 What tokens such a devils' dance?
 Our horror and our mystery became each moment stronger!—
 We shuddered and we shook, despairing,
 Forward through the midnight faring,
 All our eyes together staring,
 And stern of strength no longer;

Then last deployed into a shaft
 That lengthened out before and laughed
 As were it merrie work to keep the *godasses* in action.
 And longer—longer—endlessly
 Kept up its distance, wendlessly;
 And none gave up the trend 'less he
 Should madden to distraction! . . .

A moment paced, an hour paced,
 And still the narrow vaulting traced
 Its stone imprisonment like cell about our bodies, parching;
 No more the bats encircling flew,
 No more the patt'ring footsteps grew
 Like thunder in the passage. Few
 Retained their senses, marching. . . .

It threw us to a loathsome pit! . . .

We saw so from a single slit

Where light that served to penetrate the gloom as well
And as the wall closed to before, [exposed it.

Passed Count Le Beau outside the door

And gray-green backs—an hundred-score!—

Ere draught or demon closed it!

An ammunition-pit—this mole!

A subterranean odour stole

Through all the store of vast explosive matter here entailing;

We sprang with pressure to the place

Where last had passed the horde in space

Of half-a-minute, but no brace

Of shoulders was availing!—

Effectual locked or barred or blocked,

We lay with rifle-triggers cocked

In that dank, mousy atmosphere, all senses in revolt! —

All teeth on edge, all hearts athrob,

All heads and hands prepared to rob

Creation of this fiendish mob

That had us under bolt! . . .

But hours passed—eternity

It seemed to me! Was destiny

So scurvy trick prepared to turn on loyal troops of France?

In silence of the very tomb

We languished,—then the distant boom

Of guns brought on a near caroom

In startling variance!—

The guns above! God's mercy!—they
Were firing, then, in counter-play—

These German riflemen—these swine!—above, ay, just
From every window, every port! [above us!

Each threshold! In the tow'rs—court!

We heard their mad assassins' sport
And fretted there, Lord love us,

As prisoners! The while sped out
Red lead to put our lines to rout!

Our lines! The blood fled to my face and every man's beside
A helpless brood? From side to side [me!—

To issue from that den I tried—

In every corner, pressed and pried,
But steel and stone defied me!—

And still the shooting overhead,
And still the drums of molten lead

Poured out among our ardent arms, confounded and dis-
And then into my chaosed brain [tressed!

There swept the captain's words again!—

Dared I the premises profane
In face of his behest?

Dared I? Dared I as well to rest
While foemen in my grasp their nest

So open flaunted, scoffing at the plight of bleeding Gaul?

I thought of Ary Blas' young face,

Of Tourvoisier who had a trace

Of blood from Alsace through his race

And fought the best of all!—

Of Duran, Aubry, Bassompierre
Whose stomach was his only care,
 Yet good enough at heart and full of fatherly devotion;
Of all the rest of my small troop
In that arch-cunning master's *coup*—
The Count Le Beau, a kaiser's dupe
 And meriting hell's potion! . . .

And somehow then there came between
My thumb and fingers, cool and lean,
 A steely, hardened something that felt ghastly to the palm,
And to the heart and to the head,
And spitted at hot range cold lead,
And I advanced where duty shed
 Her light, with pulses calm;—

And no one strove to interfere
Though knowing well he 'held his bier
 Right in that ammunition-pit beneath the castle's wings;—
And raised the muzzle and one flash
Sent automatic sparks to slash
Among that sad, inhuman trash
 That makes the sport of kings! . . .

At once a vast inferno shrieked!
The sodden air with chaos reeked!
 A flame shot up that very near the sun's penumbra touched!
And, parted from my wrist, my hand
Like oak-leaf fluttered to the sand
And lay there like a mourning-band
 About the thing it clutched!

O heav'n and earth! I still with breath

A moment held converse with Death—

“Good sir,” said I, “what sacrifice is worth these broken

These charrèd limbs where powder's rims [faces?

Like lamp a narrow circlet trims?

And after all what angel skims

Away such rancid traces?”

He coughed and smiled—Satanas' child,

The Bearer of the Scythe, so-styled;

And through the depths of purgatory steps impatient

With which in one upheaval rent [rumbled;

The castle and each occupant!

So whether with a good intent

Or bad, Le Beauville crumbled!

And with a sigh my eyes unclosed—

'Twas evident the morn I'd dozed

Or part, at least, away to naught, with damp upon my

The wretched castle to explore [forehead.

I felt incumbent all the more

That I had been among the score

Below recorded dead! . . .

This fancy, singular indeed!—

Since bred of dreams' elusive seed—

I hastened to convey below to my obliging host.

Said I: “The Château Beauville fell

Expunged by ammunition-well

Exploded from a hidden cel——”

He fell back like a ghost!

"*M'sieu'!*" he cried, his sheep's-eyes wide:

"No living man has ever pried

 Into the tragic fate that overcame *Herr* Count Le Beau!
 Its ruins purged by hygiene's urge
 Of corpses as became the surge
 Of habitants to Beauville's verge,—
 So rest the late *château!*" . . .

He held his hands in horror up,
 So different from the vengeful cup

 He'd drunk the night before that I was tempted in all
 To call the whole a trick of mind— [humour
 His tale as well—and, wined and dined,
 Some pastime otherwise to find
 Than Beauville's constant rumour,

When, on a jaunt of recreation
 To dispel this fabrication,

 Came I face to face despite all purpose and design
 With Beauville's fate—a savage shatter!—
 Uninterred corrosive matter
 Fashioned with a splurge and splatter
 That crawled along the spine! . . .

The walls, upstood in partial height,
 Were yet as black as middle night

 And green with ivy's trellises and red with ivy's leaf,—
 Or was it some more sanguine dye?—
 However dole the night-bird's cry
 No less lugubrious these high
 Immortal wounds of grief!

This, then, the ammunition-pit!
I hesitated, knowing it,
 Upon the very threshold, icy fingers at my throat! . . .
My heart, my brain, my feet stood still,
My soul alone commanded will,
And in that mortuary chill
 A solemn chapter wrote:

Le Beauville's steel and stone lay hewn!
Le Beauville's floor with these was strewn!—
 Farrago of destruction such as seldom meets the eye! . . .
And then—great God! I must have laughed,
For all the shadows thought me daft
And fore and aft the echoes chaffed
 And rocked and sped my cry

Until the vast inferno shrieked!—
The sodden air with chaos reeked!—
 A fountain of dementia rose till every niche was touched!
For there like oak-leaf on the sand
Lay, parted from its wrist, a hand
All powder-black—a mourning-band
 About the thing it clutched! . . .

PART FOUR
THE BATTLE OF BEAUSÉJOUR



For General Gouraud

THE BATTLE OF BEAUSÉJOUR¹



I. *THE BATTLE OF BEAUSÉJOUR*

CANNONS and cannons and cannons that thunder!
Cannons that pillage and cannons that plunder!
Worlds that disseminate, heavens that sunder
That cannons and cannons may crow!

A dull drizzle empties its tears on the ground.
An echo repeats what is battle's first sound—
A shatter of rifles, the batt'ries dull pound,
Where the foemen encamp row on row.

The foemen encamp! . . . Now the Prussians are lain
Deep in their trenches grown pregnant with rain,
And slender and solemn like leaves in a drain,
And solemn and slender by dawn;

And the Franco line stretches like girdle of gore
Over the loins of the priestess of war,
Ardent with battle and roused to the core!
O the anguish of souls to be gone!—

“How do you go, souls?—and where do you go?
Over the parapet? Under? Below?
Martial or partial? Or riven with woe?
Tell me, O spirits, proclaim! . . . ”

¹The Author has taken the liberty of incorporating under this title the three battles of the Champagne during September, 1915.

✧ THE BATTLE OF BEAUSÉJOUR ✧

“Wine! Give us wine!” cry the spirits, replying:
“Wine! Give us wine, for the night-wind is dying,
And feverish dawn in a coma is lying!—
O mercy, destroy us the same!”

“Destroy you?—indeed!” Now does mercy prepare
A cup of a brewing most sanguine and rare
And bids every breast to uncover, that bare
It shall taste of her barb and destroy!

And forth to the battle they leap and they bound—
Forth to do battle,—these souls! And the sound
Is like clashing of cymbals when victors are crowned! . . .
Like revel and not like alloy.

It is nine of the clock and the first parallel
Vomits like oceans their spray and their swell;
And the second line throbs with emotion’s foretell—
And the wine of its craze and its lust! . . .

Discharging, bursts Franco abroad from her nest!—
Discharging at Beauséjour, madness possessed!
O then is the foeman with mercy obsessed
And he hastens the souls to their dust!

A narrow defile through the chaos is broken
As lilies bloom out of the bulb, and in token
Nancy’s Hussars from their lethargy woken
Go into the narrow *ravin*,—

Go, to be split with *barrages* winged over
Out of the German lines into the clover;—
And no place to shelter, and nothing to cover
From foam and from dust and from din!

❧ THE BATTLE OF BEAUSÉJOUR ❧

Then down go the riders and down go the horses!
And down goes the flower of Gaul's mounted forces!
And blood through the veins of each regiment courses,
 Clamouring vengeful and loud! . . .

The Hundred-and-Sixtieth raves in the field,
Brushing its bayonets edge-on the shield
Of sacking, that parapet readily yield
 Its legions to vengeance avowed,—

And passes clear over and startles the rear
With bellicose shouts and appraisals of fear!
Then the second goes down and the path is hewn¹ clear
 So the *guitounes* and *abris* expose.

An ardent wave rises, swells up to its crest,
Overflows on the shore at the battle's high test,
Its foaming blue surface an earnest of breast
 That scoffs at the spite of its foes,

And carries behind the initial advance
Of *bleu horizon*,¹ with the colours of France,
Heart 'holden to serve her, as well countenance,—
 And lips that are tense with desire

To smite this proud enemy free from the dust!
To level his earthworks and crumble his crust!—
That, sacred, the soil be avenged of his lust;
 And, smiling, the skies lose their ire. . . .

The Hundred-and-Fifty-Sixth Infantry! Hurling,
Down go the hand-grenades, swishing and swirling! . . .

¹horizon blue, shade of the French uniform

Up come the remnants of Prussia awhirling
In fragments and flutters of flesh!—

In stagnated pool and in limpid disaster!
Abri, depleted of some slinking master
Foul in the depths where the cannon has passed her,
Perishes now, bombed afresh!—

And stunned stands the grenadier, pulses athrob,
For an instant's concussion, a dull moment's sob.
But not in the nature of army or mob
Is 't to wot of life's ebb or its flow.

The *pare-éclats*¹ glisten with truculent sights,
A sourish, demonish odour invites
As the prisoned spew forth, eyes agleam in the whites,
From the cochineal pigment below,

Hands raised in Mohammedan ardour, knees bending,
A plea for the *Heimath* and *Kinder* intending.
Ere long is the column its rear journey wending;
And France makes her further advance.

From the *parallèle* forward her steady lines drive,
The first and the second and third trenches give,
When the German reserves like smoked bees from a hive
Venture resistance to France.

But no venom 's availing; the terror sweeps in!
No Mauser 's availing,—fear mingles with din
In the German morale; like an avalanche, sin
Tears the mask from her neophyte, gloating!

¹circular indentations prepared in the parapet every few meters for greater security in holding the lines

✧ THE BATTLE OF BEAUSÉJOUR ✧

To the Fortin de Beauséjour backward they carry,
The ranks in disorder and no time to tarry,
For victory's vanguard the foaming fronts harry,—
Disaster for Prussia promoting!

To the stronghold with catacombs spreading beneath
In a tunnelling morbid with Lethe's foul breath,
Come the foemen, new-locked, and the angel of death
Like a gargoye harasses their souls. . . .

Leads them up, leads them down, leads them licensed with war—
Saturnalia breeding like great drunken scar!
Stealthy fingers uncover the lurkings of char
And of bodies high-heaped in soft knolls.

Far above rolls the tumult! Far, far screams the race
Of contending despairs—life's and death's equal pace!
Moist September throws tears as the riot takes place
And the cannons and cannons retort!

What wicked tongues loose! . . . At the throat of each other
Contends fiend with fiend—it is brother 'gainst brother!—
And no sigh to soften, no saviour to smother
The bayonet's bloody cavort.

Thus thousands dispute; thus the fortin betrays
In its echoing base labyrinthian ways
Where the victor rejoices and cunningly slays,
That his very last enemy fall.

The ample din amplifies, racking and rocking,
The mad shout of battle grows smirking and mocking,
While around the red standard of murder are flocking
The legions of Prussia and Gaul! . . .

The nether-world maunders,—the upper-world shrieks!
Each shatter with further discomfiture seeks
To collapse the proud fortress; like gutter she reeks
In the fume and disaster of battle!

The counter-attack of the Prussians, fresh-launched,
Is by slaughter's brute power as rapidly staunched.
Thus is death again victor, and, gluttonous-paunched,
Feeds the fuel of her forge Cæsar's cattle!

What a nesting—a resting for blue-backs and green!—
Gray-green where the thumb of discolour 's not been!
Then the storm passes over, and naught 's to be seen
But the vanishing backs of the foes.

Backs!—backs! Further trenches relapse to the French!
Their battle-cry pierces the dull, sodden stench:
“*En avant, mes copains!*”¹ So they throttle the wench—
For is war not the mistress of woes?!

And the rain and the lead intermingle their shed
In a cold, dingy blanket, slung down overhead;
As the soil sanguine seeps are the heavens now bled,
And they cataract, piteous with pain.

But shelter seeks out no embittered gray troop
Though carnage is loathsome and sad spirits droop,
For Cæsar says: “Onward!” and hosts are but dupe!
The heavens weep pity in vain! . . .

Red night shelters rudely—and not by design
The slaughter of ages, and plies it with wine.

¹“Forward, comrades!”

“Wine! Wine! Give us wine!” And without further sign
The attacks of the enemy rouse;—

Two attacks—rapid roused! Like Messina’s alarm
Of volcanic intensity, seething and warm,
The crater up-belches its lava to swarm
The plains in a midnight carouse. . . .

Dismal drenches the plain; heavy shelling downpours;
The enemy clutters his *tranchée*¹ by scores,
So the *banquette de tir*² and the *parados*³ floors
With venom of battle by night—

The abused *maccabées*!⁴ And themselves rigid set
In the enemy’s works—’gainst the foe’s parapet,
With their blue broken lips and their uniforms wet,
France’s sons hold their own in the fight.

Noxious, laden with filth, and the tumult’s disorder,
Half in the waking world, half on the border
Of conscious unconsciousness, those who afford her
Their senses in slumber debouch. . . .

A moist phantom opes on the threshold their doors,—
Where the hearth is in tempest and ruddily roars,
Where the wife with her children an absence deplores,
And a flagon awaits, and a couch,

And an awkward strained moment, a hard brittle sob,
A smile through the mist where the childish heads bob,
And a clutch and a cry, and a low tender throb,
When the husband and father returns.

¹trench

³back wall of trench

²firing-platform at bottom of trench

⁴the *poilu*’s slang for corpses

Then is space given o'er to the meal's preparation—
A *ragôut* that bristles with tense delectation;
And here in the midst of the dreamer's elation
Sweet peace all his overtures spurns,

For the scream of a *marmite* plows into the den
Where the first flush of dawn is the murder of men!
In his *guitoune*, foul-breathed, late Teutonic swine's-pen,
He sweats and relieves for the valley.

It is thirteen o'clock by the captain's *tocarde*,¹
It is thirteen o'clock, and the sun's golden barred;
But the *boyaux*² are ghastly, the vision's new-scarred
Where the scraps of the foe sought to rally.

Fer de Lance!³—*Fer de* this, *Fer de* that,—what behooves
That the future historian his regiment moves
Through this dark, skulking alley, those plethoric grooves,
When recording the battles of France;

That the regiment swore, that the regiment spat,
That it carried the regiment's colours or cat,—
It will all sound the same from the victor's eclat,—
Quite becoming his country's advance!

Through the *Fer de Lance*, then—a *ravin* somewhat sloped,
But in no other way to be bounded or scoped
Save that here were deployed—and efficient 'tis hoped—
The Zouaves of the Fourth Regiment,

Full accoutered in khaki,—the worn, weary file
From the Battle of Beauséjour's rancour and rile

¹*poilu*'s slang for army watch, registering 24 hours without repetition of count ²communicating trenches ³Valley of the Iron Lance

❖ THE BATTLE OF BEAUSÉJOUR ❖

In agony presses, encamped a small while
To o'ercome what in courage is spent

By the late hadean orgy. The night musters out
With a stream off its tongue like invectives gone rout
Through the valley!—mock freshets and fountains that spout
And cataract down on the sleepers! . . .

So foaming day lightens, the dark burden sets;
The weary, unsheltered, unkempt troop begets
Of its *pinard*,¹ and, mingled with curses, regrets
It must mingle its toil with the Reaper's;—

From the slope is debouched through the uninterred hosts
That inhabit so freely their listening posts
On the borders of hell; equal wan with these ghosts,
Is the *Fer de Lance* distanced behind,

And the Fortin de Beauséjour timely o'erreached,
Where the battle of yester-eve heaven beseeched
With its clatter and clamour and slain left to bleach
And its *boyaux* decrepit and mined.

And the perished in horror their vigil relax
As the batt'ries resume both their terror and tax
From the valley. Pained Prussia diffuses like wax
And the furnace of France is her grave!

¹wine (*poilu* slang)

II

THE BATTLE OF THE MAISON DE CHAMPAGNE

It is early of morn. Slow, with quivering fingers,
The element rain disengages, yet lingers,—
Its misty jarred echoes pathetic harbingers
Of massacre's threats to deprave

Still fair further souls whose life-lease is waning,
Shoulder to shoulder and eye to eye straining
The dank purple distance where life-clots are draining
That suckle may fester the plain

And lavender grapes come to flower and smell
Bursting their coils with exorbitant swell
'Neath the press, that a substance is bred to dispel
What is wrought out of stain into stain:

Wine to wine! Throat to throat! Laughter, struggle, despair!
Heart's emotion: the bosom of passion spread bare
'Fore its element carnival—battle! Beware,
Else the carmine of life take to leeches!

What carmine of life?—in each *tranchée* it burns—
The fever! Sane sorrow but fitfully yearns
For its bridle to stem the mad flight that discerns
When the flagellant cannon beseeches,—

In its maw the faint echo that ransoms a world,
In its jowl the strange diet that 's gloatingly hurled
'Mong a cesspool of nations! Whence wisdom unfurled
When the steed to its gambling took?

Where virtue when venom the lust-bed prepared?
Where woman when war her lord's virtue ensnared?
It is neither to marvel the corpses impaired
Nor the rime nor the reason to brook!

But since such, indeed, is departure from sense
That wise men with fools are engarbed, no less dense!—
Of future must present require recompense,
And past in the future awaken. . . .

Hence, scribe, to the tapis! Descendants eschew
What is pleased to be called philosophical brew.
With murder and rapine the picture bedew,
Or their thirst at another fount slaken!

Then rouse up the cannon, unclutter the furrow
Where rodents like men are accustomed to burrow!
Let slaughter resume that the pulses may stir! How
Intense is the drama become!—

How vibrant the air! How unchained now the process
Of life and of death! Has our pagan no less
Than her earlier sisters the right of redress
Whether Ilium roil her or some

Later state?—whether Marathon,—Syracuse,—Tours?
They are heathens alike be they Christians or Moors!
And the Balkans protest like the Belgians and Boers,
But it does them no good in the end;—

They are pawns of the master,—an organized greed!
And he nourishes stalks from the saintliest seed;
Then come hearts to flower, to battle and bleed
That the master his pleasure defend!

✧ THE BATTLE OF BEAUSÉJOUR ✧

Ah, Maison de Champagne, no less and no more
Than war-fields come after, (as well those before),
For it isn't in hearts, be they million or score,
That the reckon of vict'ry is made,—

Your curtain of fire most virulent order—
A something 'twixt hell and Vesuvius' border! . . .
Launch forth in procession each steel-capped marauder,
Let vigour and violence parade!—

And men like small bits from the anvil go ring,
Sparkled with pain and the soul-fire's sting!
Front lines are frothing and hinder-lines swing
Through the *boyaux*, afresh for offense.

Chasseurs from Luneville and Nancy's Division—
Mark both to left, and with equal precision
Sombre-toned sons of Morocco take vision,
Strained for the stupour intense;

To right, from the Main de Massiges,—fatal void!—
The Franco-Colonial Army 's deployed,
Not yet with the slaughter sufficiently cloyed
And anxious (yet cautious) to rise.

A surface half-level bespeaks the terrain
Where, earnest engaged, valour's whelp must be slain.
The mingled morass of the Labyrinth vain
Harlot hands has unloosed to the skies! . . .

From this murmuring trough go the legions . . . torn shreds,
As the shrapnel wings over,—as fertile embeds!
Loud bubbles the pot! Tangy vapour, like threads
Through the nostrils of needles, invading,

❖ THE BATTLE OF BEAUSÉJOUR ❖

Sweeps over the field, billows yellow like clay,
So the tragic susurrus of wind learns to slay
With its foul gassy breath; now the poison makes way
And it stifles and swirls, forward raiding,—

At once clutches throat in the ranks . . .—stench of hades!
They plow through the cloud that as rapidly fades
To ravish their number ere unit evades
Some distance to fore or to rear,

To right or to left. Heavy batt'ries, engaging,
Saunter the fields, friend and foeman enraging!
Now harken, ye press, how the bev'rage is aging
Ere lavender grape shed a tear!

Stones, fresh-enlivened, propel through the line!
Skies lift their shrouds that their breasts 'carnadine,
And soil, but reflective, encrimsons with wine
That is not of the press but the vein! . . .

For temper and torrent are loosed!—France advances;
Her very best fate in the open she chances,
And neither to honour nor glory she glances
But slaughter,—the usual refrain!—

For Prussia 's engaging!—foul Prussia, bedemoned
And poisonous Prussia, by Satanas semened!
Her earthworks are melting, her units condemnèd—
And rifle to rifle they break

From their cover! O God, see this spectacle not!
Or, seeing, a leaf o'er the fatal plain blot,—
For temples are fallen, their carcasses rot
That the very infinitude ache!

A hill-face bestaggers the gallant offenders,—
Blazes with wrath and a foul offal renders
Among the attackers; resists, then surrenders!—
But farther the foemen engage,

Higher, shriller, the top is inferno of shells,—
Harsh débris, shrew rifles in draught-dragging wells,
And moist, insane death; so a sentence impels
That o'ershadows the Franco ranks' rage:

For what talisman here can insure them surcease
From the pain of defeat or the body's decease?
Or the whimpers of jelly when soul seeks release?
Or the trample of certain disaster?

Eyes aghast, flabby-jowled, molten-fleshed, they discern
What is Prussia's to squander,—their pale ranks to earn!
It is death! Sour death! And no pow'r can spurn
And no strength and no energy blast her!

"Then come, subtle mistress, cajoler of bones,
Whose carnal delight is a feast on the groans
Of the body disseminate,—ravage intones,
And defeat can but chasten the soul!"

Thus dwelt in the mind of the *commandant*; reeling,
Nestled 'twixt butch'ry, his senses congealing,
Speeds him away what is life! Instant, peeling,
While panic abroad in the whole

Of the Franco hosts ventures, light brushed by the palm
Of that strange indecision, half craze and half calm,
That threatens to swamp in a moment of qualm
All that rigid morale has encased

In a soldier's routine, and to launch them full down
To the sole of the slope, by that arch-sickle mown—
Rout! and, fertile the plain with its *horizon* sown,
Should, in likewise, with crosses be based!—

A melodious, mellifluous melody rings
Through the poised and jargogled Colonials; sings
In the ranks of Zouaves as they quiver; and springs
Lip to lip, throat to throat, as it 's passed

In contagion, adopting both ears of those halted—
Alsations, Parisians, late units defaulted
Of Soudanese, *Tirailleurs!*—sudden, exalted,
These leap, with the Senegals massed

And the clarion 'hind them, its piping appeal—
Like scruple attending the roisterer's heel
But serves to ignite him—arousing;—they wheel
And advance to the crest of the slope

Energized, with full flood of imperious power,
Through earth-heaving, death-heaving battle they tower;—
Heathenish, paganish cries brought to flower—
That only a devil may cope! . . .

For gods and such idols of Africa's dusk
As lie in the step of the Christian in husk,
Now speed to the surface, compelling and brusque
On the tongue of this ebony Turk—

Nigeria's savage! He vents him of prayer
In "Holàs" and "Yahs" nondescript through the layer
Of flame and of smoke. O, the scene has gone gayer,
And gory the shadows that lurk;

And stark overwhelming the bestial attack
That is fostered by white men, indulged in by black!
How piteous they pant! How they sweat on the rack!—
And the Teutons give back in disorder;

Down the slope—as the clarion rose them, it drives!
And the Prussians, disorganized, plead for their lives
From the African hordes, Senegal's naked knives
Brought up sharp to the fringe of their border. . . .

They flee!—and the savages after! Hark!—hear!—
How the gloating hordes bellow,—no heed to the rear
Until Ferme de Champagne of the foeman is clear
And his trappings are spread in carousal,—

Grenades and munitions, full clutter of stuff;
In the rout that transpires e'en Mausers enough
To accoutre a regiment. Gleeful, the buff
Of their khaki abroad in the tousel,

The Soudanese triumph, white teeth gleaming bare;
Black of soul as of face. And the Paris lads, fair,
With their *bleu horizon*; and the flaxenish hair
Of their brothers from Alsace inmingled;—

Headlong, propelled by that melody clinging—
The “Charge Bayonets!” of the clarion, ringing,
They pursue. . . .—too far! at the bottom up-bringing,
A wither of steel has them singled!—

Too far! Gracious God, how the ordnance tirades
Welling up from that rear where artillery parades
'Mong the fractious reserve—*reinforcing brigades*
On the side of the Frenchmen as well

As the Prussians! Two curtains, from 'fore and behind—
A tempest of terror, twofold and two-kind!
Observer has bungled and batt'ries are blind
And they shatter with shock and with shell

Their own staggered troops—their own lurid file,
Agape at the crater perceived here to rile
Over-zealous,—a seething and riotous pile
Of invectives both mortal and metal! . . .

The Senegals cower; they sense their destruction
By France's own cannons—a frightful deduction!
Compelled in this sea to succumb to the suction,
The helpless frail ketches must settle;

They sink—*Tirailleurs* with the blossom of youth
Caught under the tow of the wave from the south;
They tear and expand 'fore the powderish mouth
Of each gun as 'twere planted for foe

But fallen arrears of the rapid débâcle!—
And, locked in *barrage* with the very death-shackle,
Arises most monstrous a frightful spectacle:
Explosion in whirlpools of woe

And limbs and arms—units of some gallant corse!
How better if *enemy* cannon the source
Of the *Tirailleur's* functional body's divorce. . . .
The rattle and rain are terrific!

It pilfers—this steely mesh curtain—its toll,
It sanguifies sod with its mad demon's roll;
And circle the air and upon the soil loll
The remnants of rancour morbidic!—

All swept out!—that is, not quite all, for remains
A Zouave, who 'twixt heaven and hell still obtains,
And he mounts a dead cannon patrolling the drains,
And he flutters his flag to the French;

Then the bloody *capotes* that are lolled on the ground
In agony quiver, their contents far bound. . . .
But night sheds a tear, whence the batt'ries dull pound—
Like the spirits—goes out with a wrench.

Dark, shadowy night. With a brow peaceful bent,
Is oblivion life's utmost? Nirvana, content?
Is the gift—dissolution—so grudgingly lent
That by wars men solicit her favour?

Simple, sibilant night. How the hedges of forts,
Like the bound'ries of states and seclusion of courts,
Pale before your invisible bounds! What resorts
Do men reach in endeavour to savour

Of your consciousless calm, your extinction! Cruel night,
That the vestige of day doth dispatch from the sight
When her garments are lovely; nor suffers the plight
Of disrobement of soul in the wars!

Patient night. Yet how craven, to fly from the dawn
As if fronted with cowardice! Dastard, begone!—
With your fine saintly airs! Blush, incipient spawn,
Ere the flown night uncover *your* scars!

Thus is slaughtered the even, diffused the dark,
Unfolded the morning and muted scraps, stark
Under sundown and sunup. Concealments embark,
And panoplied day spreads her feathers. . . .

III

THE BATTLE OF L'OUVRAGE DE LA DÉFAITE

A sight opalescent new blooms, carmine-tinted,
Below and above—erubescence unstinted!—
And here—sordid mounds!—are the bodies imprinted
That bosom the earth in all weathers:

Whitish features distorted, and blackish. By heaven,
A useful, unsomnolent, temporal leaven! . . .
Why, then, all these sobs of the sighing bereaven?
Wherefore all the mournful bereft?

In the slaughter-ground wander betwixt dawn and noon,
And noon and her phantom—the dusk, (not too soon
Is the venturous voice of the day set to croon
O'er her son in his crescent) the left

Of the battle's disorder—the triumphal crews
And infantry unsuccumbed. Open the bruise
And the wound of the battle! Now gloat or enthuse,
Martialist, as the mood be upon you!—

And steer your course nonchalant. Death has no awes
For the wielder of steel. He who fashions the laws
By the right of his might and the depth of his cause
Can affect to have little to rue.

Pass beyond the entrenchment: the field is now rained
Very liberally on. Here are species of stained
Little cesspools, with heapings of dung or the strained,
(To be sure it is flesh, not ordure!)

✧ THE BATTLE OF BEAUSÉJOUR ✧

Solemn features, all lily-wax, peasant not prince,—
Who 's converting his earnest God-body to mince
That the maker of cannon rejoice and convince
His fell power and craft be sècure,

And his moneys. O war-chest, supply and demand
Are in dictum established to walk hand in hand;
Is requirement such that voracious must brand
The hunger of man for the killing?

The hunger of graves for their sombre contents?
The hunger of states for some new fundaments?
The hunger of leeches for dollars and cents?—
That to sacrifice mankind they're willing!

Then print the foot lightly for fear it will tread
Not a skull in the ground that has uselessly bled,
But upon the white sheets of some plutocrat's bed
Yawning its yaps to receive him

And buttered with ticking and buttressed with springs—
Delectable couch! that so cunningly clings
To his fat, paunchy body! . . . Why burden the kings,
Who so ardently long to believe him—

(This war-maker cushioned at home)—with the blame
Or ambition, tradition, or other mock aim
Of a holocaust? Solely to flatter a flame
Is scarce in the end to employ it

Unless there be fans to the tempest! He fears
To ignite who has tinder and torch, but arrears
Is with fuel for the furnace. While strange this appears
Yet the logic,—war-heads will enjoy it!

Then to summon discomfort once more, let us play
On the low notes of sympathy: Gone is the day
With her -curdling inspection of French-Prussian prey
And her sanguine and brilliant egress,

And her fulsome desire some shelf to o'ertake
Where her charms she may lay. In the battle's foul wake
Silver-swum is the sky—placid pewter the lake
Where unburdens now mortal distress:

Fire!—spun from the heavens! In globular stars,
The putrid compound of the enemy jars
As it flashes its brilliance like beacon from Mars
On the somnolent watchers below!—

And shivers their parapets—sears them and rambles
From crater to crater and shambles to shambles
Beneath the vague torches that follow the gambols
Of raptor, that plane in the glow

Be emerged and exposed! Then the air-guns, assaulting,
Puke up their spittle, his pathway defaulting;
And yet is so vivid the late sober vaulting,
He quits it—the raptor,—full chilled! . . .

And the night simmers sorrowful, vomiting ashes
From earth's certain wounds: savage, sulphurous slashes;
But dawn, unbecoming, applies further lashes
With mercy unflexed, and self-willed!

Degenerate dawn!—crimson stripes, flagellar?!
From cellar to ceiling the rays, burnished, bar!
Can punitive cannon here venture to char
When blaze in the sky 's so prodigious? . . .

A change in terrain is as well marked by change
In the French personnel. Now the ranks rearrange:
Chasseurs relieving—their looks marked and strange,
And *capotes* with a sliminess hideous.

The summoned-up lead of the enemy droops
Its hail in the lap of each *boyau* that stoops
As if burdened with knowledge of these or those troops
Going into the action or out;

Going forward or rearward, or right flank or left,
With precision most excellent, passage most deft.
Nor is ever grenade of its target bereft
When exposure of troops be in doubt! . . .

The incoming legions their *guitounes* secure,
Inhabited generous with straw-hatched manure
And the faithful small insects that oftentimes endure
At a scene of such revel as this!—

Despite which,—and noxious and noisome these trenches,
With horrified sounds and exorbitant stench!—
The *poilu* in slumber his couchèd head benches,
Nor wots him of yawning abyss

Where soul absolution is cunningly given. . . .
(The spirit on battlefield summoned is shriven,—
Indeed! so we're told, and, according, forgiven!
Strange heavenly logic of man!) . . .

Now plead though the cannon and shrill though the shell,
He shears him of soldierly conduct full well,
Nor is aught but the sentry remaining to fell,
And naught but the bodies o'erran

Of the sleepers. These wars—how infectious they spread:
 With rodents like sycophants sland'ring the dead;
 And *fung* parasita, the living! Be 't said
 Men go unfermented from lists,

And the joust? Germination is not further carried
 When battlefield glory some pathway has tarried?
 He mounts him a spiral where hearth must be harried
 Each rung, who in battle persists! . . .

Then—because are so warped the ignoble conceives
 Of the average young rooster he scarcely perceives
 What a drain of disorder his war-passion weaves,—
 We must dedicate further to 'chant him

Some pertinent passages amply bewrecked,
 And with blood-thirst and butchery fulsomely decked.
 He is narrowish headed who 's bullishly necked,
 And the sophist but squanders to rant him! . . .

Come, slaughter! Come, battle!—a sumptuous attack!
 Half *jus*¹ and half *gnole*² is the Franco lines' snack,
 They drink it to lighten the load from their back
 Ere going the dingy field o'er;

Well awake now, the hour is pressing on three,
 La Défaite, ill-defined, is of night shrouds scarce free
 In its furtherest outlines, when crouched at the knee
 Is the priestess's girdle of gore—

Ready springing!—the French! Out of sanctified sod—
 (If ever were such here has ventured God
 With the merciful mien that is credited, clod
 Of its ego to parch!) leaping, lying,

¹*poilu*'s slang for coffee

²*poilu*'s slang for brandy

And leaping again, yet most stealthy,—consumed
 With the ardent desire their foeman exhumed
 To behold, a disseminate creature!—is plumed
 Each grenade in the hand for the plying. . . .

It flashes through night! It propels up and out
 Like a gargoyle in fancy, this wild, wingèd scout!
 And the solitudes speak,—how they labour and shout!
 And the dark goes ashiver with rain;—

Not a blanket, but carefully oozed little drops
 That no sudden repentance the death-engine stops;
 For is slaughter not water to vineyardists' crops?!—
 Is Gaul not the playground again?

Is Prussia debarked not on alien soil?
 And what her intent if not rancour and roil?
 The farmer he putteth his corn-husks to boil
 And the vapour is large, if abortive!—

The stench is here rising! The angels flood home—
 Those small, merry rockets, fled out as from dome
 In cathedral;—the halo of Peter at Rome
 Not any more brilliant nor sportive!

Illumined, the savage night rouses to action:
 Tremendous upheaval brings faction 'gainst faction
 In death clutch! . . . How monstrous this feudal enaction!
 How blanching the flame and the smoke

As they spout metre-lengths from the parapet! Fright
 Seems to bud consternation among those in plight,
 And they shower grenades in a hurtle of light
 From the beds of their *abris*, awoke! . . .

❖ THE BATTLE OF BEAUSÉJOUR ❖

As the Franco line gives so it gets,—constant fire
And torture of metal the trenches perspire!
It circles the heads, leaping over the wire,
And craters and pouches the field,

And urges up cinder, and floats over clay
Mingled ghastly with ruins of works in dismay
And the foul swill of matter gone rich with decay!
O the ransom of souls in this yield,—

How flagrant! How heinous! Huge, awful morass,
With your heat and calm chill! . . . Metamorphosed, alas,
Is the image of God; brought to hell's dingy pass
By the bellow of fiends!—misers' lust! . . .

The rifles' pronouncement is not without spasm,
And it drills vapid holes in the cringed protoplasm;
Up-yawning, the voice of the dismal death-chasm
Claims victims as thrust follows thrust,

And slugs like a fountain of foam rise and spew
And descend! Fatal offering,—blasted a crew! . . .
Each mitrailleuse bubbles its demonish brew
In the false and fanatical morn,

Cochineal with the zeal of the fighters! So real
Is the *banquette* of blood and the flood of the steel,
That element tempest rings peal after peal
And the powers of brimstone are shorn

From the very high heavens! It lightens and thunders,
And cannons beneath have no heed for these plunders! . . .
It maddens such rage that the infinite sunders,
Enveloping murk with its veil

Of sound particles!—sleet,—surging, wandering waves,—
That around the red bosom of night, lushing, laves!
Then Prussians and Gallic their dank, humid graves
In accordance abandon,—in hail

Of the twilight of nations withdraw to the open
In combat embraced! . . . Gashed, the fiery den
Locks together—a stifle of murder and men!—
A harvest! . . . They're smothered and rent,

Scourged, blasphemed by the torrent,—the dazzling survey!—
Th' uproarious complaint! And they struggle and sway,
Sworn to ruthless hostility, battle and bray,—
And all horrors the mind can invent! . . .

“Extinguish!—destroy!—slay! Assassin, despatch!!
To the anger of nature your passions attach!
Yet hold!—are these foes not too even of match?—
Are their thrusts not too unison gauged?—

“Are their brows not the similar brows of creation
Cast into a mould of sublime adoration? . . .
What profiteth man if he serveth his nation
And loseth his soul?” “Sophist, waged

“Are the battles for honour and glory!” “Ideals,”
Says the sophist,—“as well fitting man when he steals!
Would you have your proud pagan elope with his heels,
Strip honour and glory of gains

“Personal!” “And what gains has the mass of humanity,
Metaphysician, from statesmen's insanity?”
Singly the sophist responds: “'Tis man's vanity!—
Nursling more tender than pains

“Of the sanguinest character gleaned on the ramparts,
Tranchées or battlefields! See how he starts
When you rob him of self-exaltation! . . . The darts
Of his heart are more pregnant with pride,—

“Be it shallow howe’er,—than with love! Self-conceit,—
Mark you this, fair enamoured, when lover you greet,—
Is his bauble—his pearl. Burst it not, or you cheat
Both his bed and himself of a bride!—

“Both his heart of a mistress, the world of an eden!
Esteem wounded, pity nor sympathy ken
How reduced is the man in his estimate then,—
What a dwarf has the giant become!”

Meanwhile battle the hosts as eternity ended
Or grew, or the earth on their valour depended
In size of its scope, or the moon were suspended,
Or sun hung convexed in its dome

By the pow’r of arms! Yet they grappled and swayed
Hours earlier;—still is a victory defrayed
At the coffin’s expense, and the warrior dismayed
That his flesh and his enemy’s hold;—

He pours through the earthworks left bare by the urge—
This Frenchman,—and mounts through the force of his surge
Each consequent trench till the parapets merge
With the *parados*, German lines rolled

In tumultuous terror the screaming plain back! . . .
Harrowed bayonets leap to the stalwart attack,
And the butt end of rifles: they hammer and hack
Through the violent and dismal subversion!

A skull is impaled here, its pop-eyes ballooning,
And brains the entanglements likewise festooning;
What antics these?—giddy,—of wounded, buffooning
A comrade for subtle diversion!—

What laughter!—hilarity—weird cachinnation!—
Explosive hysteria,—hideous elation!—
The gleeful lust picture! . . . it breeds decimation
As ribald as ever were penned!—

As shocking! The battered determined French band,
Conglomerate,—grouped, scattered broad, then, like sand
From a sifter, goes forth, and the Prussians take stand
In a region prepared to defend

From the rabid tormentor their desperateness. Housed
Within fortifications, their cause is espoused
By the fluent-tongued murmur of batteries roused,
And the rumble and twitch of the hill—

It is,—ah, *mes amis*,—La Défaite! Thus too true
Is the prognostication!—the wicked Fates brew
For our valiant brothers a cup they must rue
As they venture, unknowing, to fill

Their mock destiny! . . . Forward, up-clamb'ring,—the taunt
Of defeat's cannonade spouts its powder-jets gaunt
On the helmeted heads; growing rifle-pits haunt
With each swelter of bullets the bank

Of arising offenders! The air, someway faint,
Groping ghastly for freedom, pollution and taint
Does encounter! . . . Now, ravishment, rapid acquaint
With your triumph each noble French rank,—

Every spirited son of the Lily! . . . Prepare
From your casket the pearls of Gaul's manhood to share
With the moon that she cloak her with gems on the bare
Naked flesh of her bosom, exulting!

A break in the curtain!—a halt to the mist!—
A shriek of despond on the slope cannon-kist!—
And in headlong disorder the noble ranks twist
'Fore the deadly abuse catapulting,—

And surge La Défaite, both encircled and circling! . . .
The blaze from the crest where the rifles down-fling
Debauches the slope with a new Teuton ring,
And shrivels the line of assaulters! . . .

Their fierceness is blown like the pollen from leaves,
That fright with the stalk of their courage in-weaves!
The larynx congests . . . the alarmèd pulse heaves. . . .
Th' unfailing French regiment falters,

Droops and collapses,—streams backward! In wake
Of its blighted morale further units partake. . . .
The cataract lengthens,—the foe-batt'ries rake
As the slopes were asickle with maize;—

So they be!—slender twigs in the rapidish wash
Of the stream, hurtling inward and outward. A gash
Is rent sinister,—widened!—the doomed columns crash,
And a bolt of chaste lightning betrays

France's crumbling dismay! Thunderbolted, is fled
Every soul, whether living, in part, or stark dead!
How bitter the root when it 's evil that 's bled;
How sweet the pure breath of the young

✧ THE BATTLE OF BEAUSÉJOUR ✧

To the soil, still unwarped if they are! At the space
Of a moment (so 't seems) in that hell-burning place
Hung 'neath the dense offal and feverish face
Of the morn as she wanders among

Dark's dim, molten horror,—her ocean of tears,—
Enforced with reserves, up the slope Franco veers
For the third assault, masked in opaqueness;—she steers
In one sweep of infallible might!—

How?—*infallible!* Dead rear their heads at the clash!—
Bitter units combating each sting of the lash
As they fire point-blank! . . . Crash develops from crash,
Din from din, cry from cry in the night! . . .

Shrill, immense panorama! Immortal scene, rage!
In ferocity panel the world with your page!—
For phenomena pageant and legions engage,—
Supermen who for glory contest!

How the mangled beseech with their entrails emerging
Supremacy's grandeur! How pregnant with urging
Each stumped, ragged wrist! France, ahead to the purging,
And drive the foul fiend from your breast! . . .

Launched entire, the hill-face with slaughter distends,
Babbles loudly, chokes, nauseates, violently rends!
Slow day sees the Franco line bursted,—it bends,—
Mercy heaven, collapsed! in the glow

Sees written: "*Fools—madmen!—advance and ye die!*"
Is 't God or the Prussians?—who given the lie
When the blazing inferni the silhouettes hie
To their life in the regions below? . . .

PART FIVE
MISCELLANEOUS WAR VERSES



For Marshal Joffre

MISCELLANEOUS WAR VERSES



THE LAST *SÈCHE*

THE sergeant sat in the *boyau*
And his heart and his face were sad,
He puffed on a short, thick cigaret
And the smell of the smoke was bad.

His face had the torn expression
That is found on the *amoché*,
But you don't expect in the first-line trench
A voice or a smile that 's gay.

The sergeant sat in the gloaming
And the hour was seventeen,
With a change of watch from the next *guitoune*
And a *quart de jus*¹ between,

Steaming hot from the service—
The first since the last—ah God,
You're glad that the first is not the last
When you're still above the sod! . . .

The sergeant drew from his pocket
A round little ring that shone
'Neath the light of a *fusée éclairante*;²
And he said in his solemn tone:

¹measure of coffee

²flare-shell, *Bengal* rocket, etc.

“This is the last of Lhermitte,—
 Wearing it like a charm
 Like the old *Gascon* before him, while
 It kept them both from harm;

“And still before them Moulet,
 And Tourvoisier, and Leau;—
 They always give it on to the next,
 You see, before they go;

“From hand to hand, my brothers;—
 And wherever it goes it ’s sure,
 For you never can have an anxious hour
 When life is a thing secure;

“But when the voice of God
 In the dark or the daylight wings
 Its message to your soul of souls,
 You’ve looked your last on rings!”

He handed it to La Verne
 Who stood by the *abri* still
 As a meadow-lark when a rattlesnake
 Is about to coil and kill;

And the red night broke in a show’r,
 And the *boyau* rocked and ran
 With blood and flood as the heavens shook
 As a tempest’s temper can! . . .

The sergeant drew on his *sèche*¹
 With the calmness of despair,—

¹cigaret

"You know," said he,— "this will be my last!"

And a whistling filled the air. . . .

And his voice grew loud as he spoke:

"The game is a game no longer,
For death must come when life 's betrayed
That we no longer wrong her!"

Then "Pah!" said I—alone,—

For poor La Verne still shrunk
By the side of the *guitoune* holding fast
To the little ring like drunk;

And Velvelong—young lad,
He was bold of heart as a rule,
The kind that France is forced to take
To the slaughter-pen from school!

And *cabor*¹ shook 'mid the shells;
He was going down from shock,
You could see the whites of his rolling eyes
Like the face of a ticking clock;

And the others, crouched or sunk,
It depends on the way they go—
Meaning the meals that the *boches* send
With powder behind each blow!

We gazed on the sergeant. Well,
I saw him puff—heard him sigh:
A man who knew he was going off
And unafraid to die. . . .

¹literally, little dog; the *poilu*'s slang for *caporal* (corporal)

I tried to help with courage,—
 It 's a way we have at the front:
 We like to think we'll all live through
 When it 's certain-sure we won't!—

I said—and I had to bellow,
 They were raining down so heavy:
 "Why speak of the silent voice of God
 When it 's hell that makes this levy?!"

The sergeant shrugged. And his *sèche*
 Burned low. "It will be my last,"
 He said, and he meant that the cigaret
 Like his life was ebbing fast. . . .

Burning away to coals,—
 And coals into ashes. . . . Friend,
 What can you say to a man who 's sure
 He 's doomed with the evening's end?

His chance was good like the rest,
 If the game went right, not wrong;
 He thought of this but he said with a smile:
 "The game lasts over-long!"

Then the shriek of a driving *marmite*,
 The roar of a broken shell,
 The splitting wide of the tin-pan thing
 That sends good men to hell,

And the burst of a live *fusée*,
 And the shattering, spouting jet
 Of water and clay in a choking stream
 Out of the parapet,—

And the cry of a wounded man,
 And the terror of poor *cabot*,
 Who wallows there in another's blood
 Thinking he got the blow,

And the settling down of sound,
 And the staggering feel of woe
 That leaps in the face of the untouched men
 Under the rockets' glow!—

These in a smother happened
 Like the garbled gore of flesh;—
 But the sergeant sat in the *boyau* still
 Holding his dying *sèche*.

La Verne stood up before him—
 La Verne who had the ring,
 And gazed at the form of the sergeant there
 Silent as anything,

And he thought (I could see it written
 By a *Bengal* flare in his eyes)
 That the man still lived who had been so sure
 He'd dine in paradise;

And he said with a sort of sneer
 That was tempered with relief:
 "It 's amazing how these older boys
 Take on such queer belief!"

He addressed himself to the sergeant:
 "Well, how does it feel," he said,
 "To be so cock-sure you are going off
 And find life still ahead?" . . .

Silence, then, in the *boyau*,
 Like a breath from another shore
 The tiny spark of the dying *sèche*
 Flared once and then—no more!

“*Sapristi!*—are you wounded?!”
 A sudden clutch in his throat
 Brought La Verne, the sneering *poilu* down
 On his knees in the ravished moat! . . .

He touched the sergeant’s helmet,
 He felt the sergeant’s face,—
 No groan, no single breath of life,
 And still no single trace

Of bullet-wound or cannon;
 Of hand-grenade or *poire*;¹
 Yet dead as ever soldier died
 For monarch or for *gloire*!

A moment knelt the *poilu*
 While rockets plowed the sky
 With their awful, anguished, famished light
 That makes a truth of a lie,

And swept the sergeant’s features—
 Sketched out each frozen seam. . . .
 La Verne leapt to his terrored feet
 With a most unearthly scream!—

He cast a something from him
 That rolled away and spun

¹special French hand-engine

As a bullet caught him in the brain
That fled from a Mauser gun!

* * *

You know the rest: how he quivered,
How, with his fading breath,
He thought of that rolling, round something
That followed him to death.

And you who may read this story,
And you who may scoff and think
That the supernatural 's built for fools,
Have never been near the brink.

Then leave these childish warriors
With their creeds and clans to doubt;
But recall when the hour strikes that man
Like the dying *sèche*—goes out!

THE MOTHER OF PIERRE AND JEAN

(*La Mère de Pierre et Jean*)

SHE was a mother like all of you mothers:
The mother of Pierre and Jean;
She wasn't so true to the laws we call blue
But her heart had a record clean.
She loved but once and she loved right well,
Which doesn't exclude her from heaven nor sell
Her soul into bondage—they're calling it hell!—
The eminent preachers, I mean.

She married a *comte* like you marry a man—
For better and seldom for worse!
It wasn't her fault that his bodily vault,—
The same as his fluent purse,—
Was tainted through; it 's a way they have,
These old-line nobles who cheat the grave
By sending heredity on to pave
The way for the family curse!

She bore one son and his name was Pierre,
And he grew to a small amount,
And he drank and swore and he smoked by score
And his cronies called him "Count."
And she bore another and younger son,
And he wasn't a whit like the other one—
Which may be explained, but it isn't done
At the babe's baptismal fount! . . .

He was fair and blond—was the stripling Jean,
 And his heart was a singing thing,
 Which is seldom lacked in a love compact
 Where the least import is the ring;
 He grew up large and his chest spread wide—
 The pray'r of his mother and his father's pride,
 But the eyes of his brother could not hide
 Their evident jealous sting.

The day arrived which was bound to arrive
 When the war grew out of the day.
 The summons came—for a noble name
 Is first to respond, they say;
 Then the mother of Pierre and Jean took leave
 Of her soldier-sons on the battle's eve
 For France is brave and she learns to grieve
 Only when clay is clay.

The hours pass,—oh, what mad suspense
 Is borne on the red dawn-light
 As the battles rage and the foemen wage
 Their cause in the name of right;
 And back in the depth of her shiv'ring soul
 A mother prays that they spare her toll—
 (And it wasn't because of Pierre she stole
 To her lover's arms that night!)

They brought her word ere the battle's end
 That her gallant son had crossed
 Through the channeled field with its ghastly yield
 So worn, so devil-tossed,

And rescued out of the jaws of hell
 A batt'ry-crew whom a splintering shell
 Had covered in like a water-well
 With the first approach of frost; \

And she sobbed with pain—the pain of delight
 That the battle had been fought,
 And a triumph won by her hero-son;—
 And it was of Jean she thought:
 His broad blue chest with its *Croix de Guerre*,
 She could see the medal resting there
 Like a laurel he was pledged to wear;
 And she dreamed of the marvel wrought.

Seven days passed, and in seven days' time
 A slender form in the door
 Appeared. She shrank at the look she drank
 From his face that was fresh from war! . . .
 "My son," she said—the mother of Pierre,
 For she saw he was short and dark—not fair;
 Then her eyes strayed down till they rested there
 On the *Croix de Guerre* he wore! . . .

He saw the look and he read her eye
 And said in a manner sneering:
 "It was I—not Jean!"—and surveyed the scene
 That her mother's heart was fearing.
 How her pulse leapt up at the terrible news!
 How her soul shrank in to escape this bruise!
 She said with a calm that was yet a ruse,
 "Your exploits, Count, want hearing!" . . .

She led him in where his father sat—
 The senior-*comte* in his glory:
 The Stygian daughter of France is slaughter,
 Her males love the wench most gory!
 The door closed to as the mother left,
 Or not quite to, for a small slit cleft
 The threshold high and low from the heft
 As the son commenced his story. . . .

The *comtesse* heard and she sighed apace
 For her breast seemed strangely filled;
 She sought the gloom of her private room
 But the atmosphere was chilled.
 "Ah, *Vierge*," she sobbed,—“is my love-child slain?
 Tell me, I beg, will he come again—
 Jean—my Jean!” It was all in vain,
 She felt he had been killed!

And the night came down and the day fled out
 And the *comtesse* still lay sunk
 In her wearied doubt like a soul gone rout
 That with guilt or pain is drunk.
 And she finally rose and repaired below
 To the room of the senior-*comte*, and lo!
 There on the threshold stood—God no!
 She saw it was a monk.

“Father,” she said,—“you come from war,
 Is my son—do you know—Jean, dead?”
 A silence passed o’er the sombre cast
 Of the priestly face and head.

"Daughter," he said,—“your son was shot,
Yonder he lies in an alien plot,
Further, I pray you, ask me not—
Enough that he fought and bled.”

A laugh like the curdling laugh of doom
Broke from the wall beside;
“Fought and bled?—why he fled instead!”
Pierre, the young *comte*, cried.
“He was shot in the back—the back, do you hear?
Jean—your son—he was shot in the rear,
No brother of mine, *sacre Dé*, never fear,—
Nature, my lord, has lied!”

Then over the mother of Pierre and Jean
Swept, as her senses stirred,
A hint of the stain of the Magdalene
As she heard herself thus slurred.
She sank to her knees and her lips ran o’er—
But it wasn’t the priest who came from war
Nor the senior-*comte* who stood in the door!—
But the soul of Jean that heard!

SAXONS¹

SAXONS, Saxons, friendly Saxons,
Harken to humanity:
France repels and dearly sells
Her land to Prussian deviltry,
But she has no quarrel with thee,
Friendly Saxons!

Brothers, brothers, Teuton brothers,
Is our quarrel so ill to heal?
France's heart and Dresden's art
Should fraternize without the feel
Of hot cold lead and Prussian steel,
Friendly Saxons!

Harken!—harken!—disremember
All that flame and sword have taught;
France's pain, like Flanders' drain
And Saxony's, is dearly bought;
See what Prussian pride has wrought,
Friendly Saxons!

Broken, broken, bled and broken,
All that dust-gray forms may yield
France must gather to her mother-
Heart upon the battlefield,
Crucified on Prussian shield,
Friendly Saxons!

¹In commemoration of the fraternization of French and Saxon units on Easter Sunday, 1915, in the trenches of Flanders

✧ MISCELLANEOUS WAR VERSES ✧

"Pardon, pardon, Lord-God, pardon!"
Speak, O Saxons, thus the word! . . .
France's ear is paused to hear
Your voice above the Prussian sword,
Sobbing: "Mercy on us, Lord,—
We are Saxons!"

DRIP, DRIP, DRIP, THE CRIMSON STREAM

DRIP, drip, drip,
 The crimson stream is flowing—
 Ah me, the bleeding heart of France,
 Ah me, the lily-heart of France,
 The forms lie: hearts, legs, arms astrewn,—
 Jargogled forms in the red-hot noon,—
 And the blood of France is going. . . .

The crimson stream,
 Ah, the crimson stream,
 And the wrecks of the men that were;
 And the mothers' dream,
 And the woman's dream,
 And the forms that never stir.

Drip, drip, drip,
 The *boyaux* drip with gore—
 Hand and hand in a raging morn. . . .
 And the forms will move no more.
 The crimson heart of a bleeding France
 That fought and stood—what for?!

The crimson stream is flowing,
 The blood-red sun is glowing,
 Ah, France, my France, while the day is done
 Your golden youth is mowing;
 And the crimson stream flows on.—
 Each trench is a festering, bleeding bog,
 Each form is a fallen log.

❧ MISCELLANEOUS WAR VERSES ❧

Morn, noon and night, and the chill of death,
And the heat of a battle-clash;
Poilu and *boche* and the hell-fire's breath,—
Grim is the iron lash,
Grimmer than grim is the work of war,
And the forms that stir no more.
Flash, cannon! Slash, cannon!
Crash in the work of war,—
And the price will be paid in gore. . . .

Ah, yes—the crimson stream
Torn from the heart of France—
The lily-heart—in a devils' dance,
Drip! Drip! Drip!

THE WARM WIND

THE warm wind, the warm wind,
The wind that 's warm with fear—
The chill wind, the still wind,
The wind that drops a tear—
The cold wind, the bold wind,
And the wind between the lines—
The clover-heads that quiver,
And the crashing wind that whines—

The warm wind, the storm wind,
The gassy wind—ah, God!—
The gassy wind—the gag—gag—g—
The dead wind on the sod;
The dead wind, dead wind,
That odours with its nod.

Wind—wind—soft wind—warm wind, blow!
The sun is in the clover and all the world 's aglow
With dead men, red men, lying in a row,—
Blow, wind—go, wind—heavy wind, go! . . .

PARISOT AND FELIZÉ

PARISOT and Felizé,
 One is dead, the other sad,
 One is dead beneath a cross,
 Cross of wood—"Croix de Bois"—
 Well, what are you crying for?
Ça! he was a tender lad,
 Tender—gay—
 Parisot, not Felizé.

Felizé was sad and said:
*"J'en ai mare! J'en ai mare!"*¹
 And his whole *capote* was red,
"J'en ai mare! J'en ai mare!"
 Will the war, then, soon be done?"
 "Not until the war is won!"
 Slender—gray—
 Said Parisot to Felizé.

Who came out of Arras' hell?
 Felizé—not Parisot!
 Only salad-roots can tell
 Felizé from Parisot.
Copains, frangins, all must part,
 Those who share must bear the blow
Pour la France! Pour la France!
Ah, oui! et pour
PARISOT!

¹I am sick and tired of it!

A STREET IN HELL

Do you know the first-line trench with its sanguine, anguished bottom,
 And the *parados* and the parapet and the *totos*, rank and rotten,
 And the *pare éclats* and the ghosts that are with their ration wine besotten,
 And the *maccabées* and the *amochés* by the *boche*-hell-spitters gotten? . . .

Do you know that the *créneaux* stuff with rats that are stuffed with rations
 From putrid dead as they lay and bled in death at their hell-born stations?
 That feet that freeze to their quaking knees are more eloquent orations
 Than the wind that blows from the stinking rows to the zymosis of nations?

A silent sound in the sibilant night is the tick of the *tocarde* sounding—
 No clarion blare through cerulean air to awake big *Bertha's* pounding,
 But the tick-tock-tock of the captain's clock as the fifteenth hour 's rounding,
 And the crouching foe that will never know how his foeman's heart is bounding!

❧ MISCELLANEOUS WAR VERSES ❧

Overhead, underneath, before, behind, like a sheet from a ghastly
docket,
Comes the leaden pain that is stilled in vain by the eyeball's
reddened socket;
And the street grows faint as it paves with paint and the dung-
hills rise to mock it;
Then O good God! give this saddened sod a key from on High
to lock it! . . .

BEHIND THE GARDEN-WALL¹

OUR *escouade*² was following
 A *boyau*, dank, and wallowing
 With dead men, so the hollow ring
 Was like a sad, sad note;—
 When 'round the turn ahead of us
 A captain came, who said to us:
 (His blue *kepi* looked red to us
 And so did his *capote*)—

“Advance until the *boyau* ends,
 And after that a street descends,
 And after that a garden wends,
 And after that a wall;—
 Be careful there for what you find,
 The enemy is just behind,
 It may be that the place is mined;
 I'll get you out on call.”

We stepped-to-toe in that *boyau*,—
 And all the dead men laughing so,
 They laughed at us—(how could we know
 They didn't laugh at all?)—
 We came out on the other side;
 The street was there—not very wide,
 And bullets thick;—you could have died
 Before the garden-wall!

¹the Germans occupied the cemetery of Neuville St. Vaast during one of the early battles in Arras, firing from behind the headstones; the “garden-wall” directly adjoined this cemetery

²pronounced: *ess-coo-ahd*

We had to run—we ran for it!
 And half the *escouade* was hit;
 The *Gascon* went, and *cabot* lit
 All crumpled in a heap,
 And little Raymonde *amoché*,¹—
 The young boys always go that way
 With whim'ring souls that seem to say:
 "It ought to make you weep!"

But "La-Terreur" was first ahead;
 It wasn't how poor *cabot* bled
 That made him hurry, but instead
 A curious remark:
 "Be careful there for what you find!"
 Now what was it could be behind
 The garden-wall that whined and whined
 With bullets, day or dark? . . .

So up he went and in we went,
 And water was our real intent,—
 For water-wells are always blent
 With garden-walls in France;
 The nodding flowers swept our knees
 With pollen that caressed the breeze
 And strewn the grass. Ignoring these,
 We hastened to advance. . . .

¹pronounced: *ah-moo-shay*

And what was there?—a cellar-door
 And something sprawled out on the floor
 That had no clothes but what she wore
 Ah, God! the night before!—
 And cheeks pale-white and eyes tight-closed
 And bullet-wounded breasts exposed—
 And there that morbid garden dozed
 When all around was war!

The *escouade* stood rooted fast
 As if the whole blue line were gassed,
 And such it was—that sight surpassed
 The worst we could recall;
 When smashing with a crashing bray
 The cemetery slabs gave way
 Before a humping stream of gray
 So near the garden-wall,—

It rose—it blew,—like crimson dew,
 Among us, as the *boches* grew
 From underneath the head-stones—whew!—
 We crumbled 'fore each ball;—
 And hotter—hotter—hell was sent
 Into our ranks;—and this event
 No doubt was what the captain meant
 Behind the garden-wall!

BRANDY LAST!

OH, I sing the tale of the fresh recruit
 (Than are there few in the ranks of France)
 For the youngest and oldest are driv'n to 't
 (In the ranks of France, 'gainst the *boche* advance)
 And stayed they at home they'd live to rue it
 (And the *boche* would advance in France)

Then hark to my tale that has brandy in it
 (They call it *gnole* on the western front)
 And you kill a man every living minute
 (For the first-line trench must bear the brunt!)
 But a man can't fight any more than a linnet
 (When his paunch is an empty punt)—

So you drink the *jus* or the *flotte* or *pinard*¹
 (Colder than cold on a winter day)
 Eat your *ragoût*—be glad it 's no meaner
 (They eat at home what you throw away!)
 And some of you fatten and some grow leaner
 (But hark to a *poilu*'s lay):

Last comes the brandy! after the ration
 (Scorching the teeth in your quiv'ring jaw)
 Last comes the brandy! make it the fashion
 (Warming the threads of your ice-cold maw)
 Last comes the brandy! have no compassion
 (On him that forgets this law!)

¹the coffee or the water or wine

DAWN'S CARMINE LIPS

PARTING over Verdun
In wide-eyed wonder at the ignorance of morn—
Parting over Verdun
Where German arms and Franco clash and are reborn;

Parting over Verdun
Through sable night's mad mortuary of shorn souls;
Parting over Verdun
Around whose tortured roots a darker horror rolls;—

Parting over Verdun
With breath so bated that the sombre war-gods sigh,
Parting over Verdun
As each dead comrade weeps to see the other die;—

Parting over Verdun
In slaughter so supreme the sad shroud quivers—drips—
Parting over Verdun:
O, the illicit wonder of dawn's carmine lips! . . .

THE HIGHWAY

(*From Arras to Bethune*)

WE stand upon the highway, watching, waiting,
 A company of soldiers, waiting, watching,
 And all our thoughts are touching
 As we quiver,—
 And all our thoughts debating
 What if ever
 Can man do to remake what has been shed
 Of these grand forest dead. . . .

The *platan*¹es¹ on the highway, slowly swooning,
 Two solemn rows that falter, swooning slowly,
 'Mid all this most unholy
 Mad ignition
 Of nations; whence their pruning
 Is attrition
 So wanton that the heavens shrill with pain
 For tree-architecture slain! . . .

The sappy trunks go nesting to their knees,—
 So kneeling with each cannon's cough, they're pressed
 Like burdens to the breast
 Of France's soil;
 Like figures in a frieze
 That pant with toil.
 And, crimsoning, the grieving sun falls low,
 As low as they below. . . .

¹plane trees

❧ MISCELLANEOUS WAR VERSES ❧

These stalwart ones that sang and, singing, blew,
And crashed off, amputated from the sky,—
Their boughs have swept it dry
Of any tears;
Their leaves have lushed the brew
Of hopes and fears;—
But one bright gleam succeeds from all this blight:
In place of shadows—*light!* . . .

MOONLIGHT ON THE FIELDS

THERE are sad things in war,
Ah, sad things in war,
Mad things, and maddest
The gleaming of gore,
The paleness of feature—
The stiffness of jaw—
And moonlight that whitens the fields. . . .

Stiff faces stiffen
And white faces blanch,
Every *corvée* creeps away to a trench;
What though the wounded pass out with a wrench,
Moonlight is white on the fields.

Streaming, gleaming moonlight,
Beams that make the night white,—
Dazzling paleness, wailing dawn
Sees the moonlight streaming on
White fields, white faces,
White thoughts in dark places!—
Still, opalescent fields
Crested with the sombre yields
Of war—war—moonlit war—

DEEPENING NIGHT DRAWS HER DAMPENING SHROUD

DEEPENING night like a dampening shroud
Clothes for a moment the void in her cloud,

Fitfully tempting the air-corps to rise
Out of the nebula into the skies—
Airmen most scrupulous, worldly and wise.

Teuton, O Teuton, go back to your haunt!
Franco air-pilots—aware of your taunt—

Skip to the scatter of skies; dive and dare,
Caring for nothing so much as dull care!—
Harken!—the wind! Ah, the heavens grow bare! . . .

Full in the face of the enemy flyer
Bleaches the moon now; the *avions*¹ spy her!—

Raging apace like a startled-eyed fawn
'Twixt the allied and the slumbering dawn
Ventures the visible one, motor-drawn!

Profile to peril, she wearies of danger,—
Longs to demerge; but the *avions* range her.

Catapult out in one tenuous stream
Drums of red lead! How the star-echoes scream,
Pained in their panic—ashock from their dream!

The Teuton, uncertain, quivers—and faints,
As amber-shot midnight a swift carmine paints!

¹airplanes, generally applied to pursuit planes (*avions de chasse*)

With lurid and turbid mad atmosphere's pang,
A fusty, aged odour is spliced with smoke-tang;
In the light of the comet the *avions* hang.

Breathless now they in their roaring success!
The nebula closes with crimson caress

Over the thing that was pulsing and proud,
Born of invention but spirit endowed;
And deepening night draws her dampening shroud.

CHAMP D'HONNEUR¹

HERE lies Georges Parisot, *mort au Champ d'Honneur*,
 Wear for him a flower, sister,
 Pray for him each hour, mister,
 Cannons must devour;—this were
 Part of war's *malheur*.

Here lies Jean Raveneau, *soutien-de-mitrailleur*,
 Bear it well—'tis glory, mother,
 Where he fell how gory, brother!—
 France's age-old story, other-
 Wise no *Champ d'Honneur*.

Here lies Jules Catalain, *mort au Champ d'Honneur*,
 Red must be his bier; though slain,
 Shed for him no tear, *copain*;
 You may lie with him *demain*
 With your bleeding *cœur*!

Here lies Raymonde Sainte-Marie, *sergeant-artilleur*,
Çà!—he loved you well, *petite!*
 Fighting as he fell,—defeat
 Only claims his shell,—*spirite*
 Knows no *Champ d'Honneur*.

Here, then, lie the Hero-Sons: Army Corps *sans peur!*
 Dying for your pride, *patrie*,
 With their heads at France's knee,
 Lying side by side—ah me,
Mort au Champ d'Honneur!

¹the Field of Honor: intended as a series of epitaphs

HOW CALM THE HOUR

How calm the hour,
How moist the air;
The pale cross slumbers
In Argonne's lair.
The faint moon rises,
The dull stars shirk,
In Argonne's forest
The strange forms lurk.

Bitter noon passes
And sad day sets,
Narrow night ponders
And peace begets.
Shallow the stillness,
Sweet the soft hour,
In Argonne's forest
The strange forms cower.

Breath of the morn
With terror inspired!—
Molten your breast—
Too passionate fired!
Crimson and carnal—
Uncloisters the sun;
In Argonne's forest
The slaughter 's begun,
And the savages run
With the hours! . . .

TWO SIDES OF A HILL¹

GO up, go down, go up, go down,
What 's rampant with death is wisely sown,
What 's pregnant with life is poorly built
For life is a rot to the hilt!—

Life that quivers, and, quivering, dies.
Under the sod young manhood lies.
Some call it glory and some call it guilt,
Life is a rot to the hilt!

Go up, go down, the field is sown,
The fert'ler the valley the harsher blown;
The riper the human the lighter the wilt,
For life is a rot to the hilt!

Life is a rot, life is a rot,—
Brothers should murder that others cannot!
Cannons should maul that blood may be spilt,
Life is a rot to the hilt!

Up the hill, down the hill—St. Eloi,
Fertile with men under *Croix de Bois*.²
Under the sun spreads the tomb-lined quilt;
Life is a rot to the hilt!

¹a philosophy indulged in on passing over the grisly battle front at Ecoivres (Arras); the burying-ground is the Mont St. Eloi, a once beautifully fertile slope

²wooden crosses

Eloi, quilted on one side with grain,
Quilts on the other with species of slain:
Slain from the war! What a succulent lilt:
Life is a rot to the hilt!

Go up, go down, the field is sown,
Death is the reaper, for what is grown?—
Only the sperm for another tilt! . . .
Life is a rot to the hilt!

Life is a rot, life is a rot,—
Brothers should murder that others cannot!
Cannons should maunder that blood may be spilt,
Life is a rot to the hilt!

L'Envoi

Mothers should murder that brothers cannot!
Life is a rot, is a rot!

THERE ARE THOSE WHO PASS

MARCHING by one,
 There are those who pass—
Some through the *boyaux*,
 And some through the gas,
Some through the night-wind
 And some through the air—
Soldiers and phantoms
 And dreams and despair. . . .

There are those who pass,
 Marching by one—
In the dead night
 And always alone.
Though the shrapnel shatter
 And they fall in mass:
Yet they go singly—
 Those who pass. . . .

THE ZOUAVE CLARION

(*An Incident in the Storming of the Maison de Champagne*)

WHAT is it that flashes like lightning through the souls
of men frenzied with fear,
Falling to defeat or rising to victory?
The Zouave clarion—amber-pure, bell-like in its clear
Glory! . . .

Ah, the sad goals of men!
Ah, the mad souls of men!
The faint hearts, the burning desires,
The advancing death, the eternal fires!
Comrade, you will not hesitate—
Who is in fear of carrion?
The battle rages—the foes attack!
Now blow—the Zouave clarion!
Blow! Blow! Piercing—true!
Forward! There is no standing back. . . .
Oo—la-la——oo!¹

A spurt of blood and the *commandant* falls dead!—
He who said:

“*On les aura!*”²

Can we hesitate—who stand in quiv’ring fear
Beside his bier? . . .

On les aura!

¹the *oo* pronounced here to rhyme with true, blue, etc.

²“We get them!”—the French battle-cry

Forward!—we get them! Rise, Horizon Blue!
 There is no standing here!
 Oo—la-la——oo!

Before us looms the enemy. . . .
 We storm and rise;
 He brings his venom down upon us. Destiny
 Within him lies.
 With us the Senegalese, those butchers from the dark!—
 (Our African colonies). Murder's now rampant stark!—
 Nigeria, what hast thou sent?
 Morocco? Soudan?
 Heathen gods, look upon us: slaughter blent
 With righteousness! Is this a man?

We tremble—sway. . . .
 Night glowers dark—(or day?)
 Blow,—blow, clarion!
 The receding foeman anguishes and cowers;
 Up! Onward, France! Bayonet! and tarry none!
 The day is ours!
*Grimpez le parapet! Sauter le parapet!*¹ Blow anew,
 Clarion!—clarion!—
 For those slain and them that slew:
 Oo—la-la——oo!!

Sad, sad goals of men.
 Faint on the burning air your pungent smile, O eternity,
 Weaves dismal echoes. When
 Will there be
 Sufficient victory?—

¹Climb the parapet! Jump the parapet! (the French "Over the top!")

THE END OF THE TWENTY-SEVENTH DAY

(*Relief at Arras*)

IT is over: all the storming—
All the shelling,—the alarming.
How our hearts sing!
Over fields a column's filing,
See, poor lads,—their lips are smiling
For they bring
To us the rear!
To them—but what to them that we have not?
We go from here
Powder-laden, with a moist, ignoble smell
Clinging to our clothes
As if a rose
Were dipped in hell.

We are the relieved, and out the countless *boyaux* pass—
A narrow blue column
Fearful solemn,
Yet we are the relieved.
It is the twenty-seventh day
And scarce to be believed!—
We have rotted in that—. . . Pray
God to be relieved
Likewise of memory! . . .

It is over! Some lay sunken
Where the ground is all but shrunken
 From their bones.
A regiment of crosses mass
Where the living dead men pass—
 Our regiment of bones
 And sticks and stones! . . .
We pace the weary miling to the rear,
 Hearts like the rising sun!—
 For after all, the peal and gnaw of gun—
Our peal and gnaw—
 Are they not over? . . .

POILU SLANG AND FRENCH EXPRESSIONS

A

abri, a dugout or trench residence.
amoché, wounded.
andouille, stupid—an epithet.
arrivée, a German shell.
as de carreau, knapsack.
avions de chasse, pursuit biplanes.
azor, another name for knapsack.

B

babillarde, letter.
bande de vaches, literally: band of cows, an epithet.
bandes moletières, wrappings for the legs, a *poilu's* leggings.
bachot, bed.
banquette de tir, elevated bank of earth in a trench to stand and fire from.
barre toi or *barre toi de là*, get out of the way.
bidoché, meat.
bidon, canteen.
binette, face.
bistro, a drinking-house.
boche, German soldier.
bête de singe, literally a box of monkeys—1 lb. of canned meat.
boucle la lourde, close the door.
bouffer le pissenlit par les racines, eat the salad by the roots, a buried man.
bouzziller, to kill.
boyau, communicating trench.
boyau d'évacuation, trench for removal of wounded.
brancardiers, stretcher-bearers.
bras-cassés, corruption of *brancardiers*, meaning literally broken-arms.
bricheton, bread.

C

cabot, corruption of *caporal*, literally toy-dog.
cachibi, another name for dugout or trench residence.
cafard, the blues.
caisson, a large wagon carrying supplies.
calbombe, lamp.
camion, a French motor-lorrie.
capote, *poilu's* overcoat.
carafé, literally a decanter, slang for head.
c'est moche, it looks rotten.
chenilles, caterpillars, a name for single-lights in strings.
chic, nobby, stylish.
claboter, to die.
copain, friend and pal.
crapouillots, small aerial torpedoes.
créneau, shooting-hole in the parapet.
croquenots, shoes.
croute, food.
culasse, breech-block of a rifle, or cannon.

D

débine-toi, beat it.
défiler à l'ours or *défiler en tête*, go to prison.
départ, a French shell.
donne-moi de la flotte or *un quart de flotte*, give me some water.
donne-moi du riffle, give me a light (for a cigarette, etc.)
Dieu or *Mon Dieu* or *Nom de Dieu* or *En nom Dé*, God, Name of God,
 etc.

E

échelon, small wagon or train of wagons carrying machine-guns.
En avant! C'est pour la France! Forward! It is for France!
épatante, cute, pretty, fashionable.
espèce d'abruti, numbskull—an epithet.
espèce d'andouille, fool, stupid—an epithet.
état-major, staff officers.

F

falzard, pants.
ferme ta boîte or *ferme ton égout*, shut up!
flancher, to give up.
flotte, water.
fourbi, mixture of everything.
fout le camp au diable, go to the devil!
frangin, brother-in-arms.
frichti, food.
Fritz, German soldier or army collectively.
fusée, head of a shell.
fusée blanche, ordinary colourless rocket.
fusée éclairante, star-shell, flare-shell, rocket, *Bengal* fire.
fusil, rifle.

G

gamelle, tin-pan for food, part of equipment.
gerbe, bouquet of lights, generally signal for barrage.
gnole, brandy.
godasses, another name for shoes.
gonzesse, girl, lady-love, sweetheart.
grimper le parapet, climb the parapet, the French "over the top."
guitoune, another name for dugout or trench residence.

I

il a le cafard, he has the blues.
il est bouzillé, he is killed.
il est moins cinq, it missed you by an inch.
il grille une sèche, he smokes a cigarette.
il n'a pas la trouille, he has no fear.
il ne faut pas s'en faire, never worry.
ils s'engueulent, they argue.

J

je crois qu'on pourra numéroté les abatis, I think you better number your legs, i. e., you will be blown apart.
je l'engueule, I argue.

je n'ai rien à bouffer or *boulloter*, I have nothing to eat.
j'en ai mare, I am sick and tired of it.
je suis fauché, I am broke, moneyless.
jus, coffee.

L

lance-pierre, literally stone-thrower, slang for rifle.
liquette, shirt.
litre, a quart measure of anything.
license chien, literally dog-license, identification tag.
loustingue dingo, crazy-nut.

M

maccabé, dead man.
marchez par un, march by one, i. e., single-file.
margoulette, another name for face.
mariolle, a bluffer.
marmite, another name for a German shell, literally sauce-pan.
mes enfants, my children, a form of address from officer to soldiers.
mitrailleuse, a machine-gun.
môme, same as *gonzesse*, i. e., lady-love, sweetheart, girl.
morlingue, pocket-book.
musette, canvas bag for reserve food, fork and spoon, part of equipment.

N

nuage de gaz, gas-cloud.
numérote tes abatis, mon vieux, number your legs, my old friend.

O

On les aura! We get them, meaning the *boches*—a battle-cry of France.

P

pannards, feet.
panouille, stupid—an epithet.
papelards, official papers, orders.
parados, the rear wall of a trench.
parapet, the top part of a front trench.
perlot, tobacco.

❖ POILU SLANG ❖

permissionnaire, a man of leave, soldier on furlough.
pied de choux, literally foot-of-a-cabbage—an epithet.
pinard, wine.
piou-piou, French "Tommy Atkins."
planque ta trogne, down with your head.
planquez-vous, duck, get down, squat, flatten.
plaque d'identité, identification tag.
poignon, money.
poilu, literally a hairy man, France's nickname for her sons.
poltron, coward.
pompes, another name for shoes.
poste d'écoute, listening-post.
poste de secours, first-aid station.
poule, literally chicken, applied to lively girls or sweethearts.
pour rallonger le tir, for ranging the fire.
punaises, literally bed-bugs, applied to lentils, small flat army beans.

Q

quart, a tin cup, measuring $\frac{1}{4}$ of a *litre*.

R

rabiot, left-over food.
ragoût de bœuf, beef-stew, the principal army dish.
ravitaillement, food supplies, food service.
ripatons, another name for feet.
rosalie, facetious name for bayonet.

S

sac, knapsack.
sac au dos, knapsack on the back.
sardines, stripes, denoting ranks in army, etc.
sautez le parapet, jump the parapet, "over the top."
sèche, cigarette.
suivez-moi, follow me.
syphon, another name for head.

✧ POILU SLANG ✧

T

tartines, another name for shoes.

tiens! harken, listen.

tocarde, watch.

toubib, nickname for doctor.

tranche, also used for head.

trogne, also used for head.

troquet, another name for drinking-house.

U

une balle m'a rase les tiffes, a bullet "burned my hair."

uniform de fantaisie, dress uniform.

un train de plaisir, a pleasure-train, i. e., whistling shell.

V

voyez, look, see.



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